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THE SHULAMITE

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THE SHULAMITE

BY

ALICE & CLAUDE ASKEW

London

EVELEIGH NASH & GRAYSON LTD.

148 Strand

1923

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THE SHULAMITE



CHAPTER I

THE SHULAMITE

THE wagon creaked along slowly, the great oxen taking their own pace. A Kaffir boy was driving another, running beside it, cracking his long whip and talking loudly to the team. Inside the closed wagon two men were sleeping. One was young and had the appearance of an Englishman; the other, whose age might have been between sixty and seventy, looked what he was—a Boer farmer.

They were journeying across a wide and lonely plain of the Orange Free State, bare and waste save for a few milk bushes, and here and there stray tufts of long rank grass. It was dry and sandy, and the hot African sun streamed down in a shower of glitter out of a sky so blue that the colouring seemed almost

crude. Everything needed softening, except the distant range of low hills. They were good to gaze at by reason of the delicacy of their pink and mauve shading. Perhaps Nature had been too busy toning and painting them to spare time elsewhere.

The farmer stirred and muttered in his sleep. He was a thin, long man; his face would have been cruel except for the softening touch of his grey beard. He had the eyes of the merciless judge, and his thin, hairy hands were tenacious. Even his large flat feet expressed character. They would tread out a path and turn neither to the right nor to the left. His mouth was his best feature; it might have been the mouth of a dreamer or a zealot—possibility was in it for either part.

“Deborah.” He muttered the name with a curious tenderness. Then a stir ran through his body, and he stretched out his limbs, yawned and awoke. Waking, he looked half suspiciously at his companion; but the slow, quiet breathing of the younger man reassured him. Robert Waring would not wake for a while, so there would be time for Simeon Krillet to read his morning chapter, without the consciousness of the other’s wondering stare.

Krillet drew a small, well-worn Bible from a pocket of his heavy, untidy coat, and hesitated a second where to open it. Then with a determined click of his lips he turned to

the love-song of Solomon. All that was puritanical in his nature protested against the choice, but something in his blood, a new hot turbid emotion, proved victor in the conflict. He settled a pair of horn spectacles upon his thin, prominent nose, and, leaning against the curtain of the wagon, began his reading. Light streamed in through a curtain partially pulled aside and played on his face and book, giving a curious yellow tone to both.

He read very slowly, putting his finger on each line, but by degrees the love-madness of the song kindled up his dull brain, and he began to roll the lines out, his voice rising and falling with the sway—

“Behold, thou art fair, my love, behold thou art fair; thou hast doves’ eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from Mount Gilead.” He paused here, and sucked in his breath slowly, and his eyes seemed bent on some inward vision. He went on—

“Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bears twins, and none is barren among them.”

The Englishman was awake, and was listening with twinkling eyes. But the old man, wrapt in his reading, heeded nothing.

“Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks.”

Robert Waring could not help it. Those

sensuous, passionate lines glowing of the East, and the old man reading them! The contrast was too strong for his risible faculties. He burst into a hearty roar of laughter, then pulled himself up with a vehement apology. He was honestly ashamed of himself, and the genuine contrition in his voice quelled the other's wrath.

Simeon Krillet shut up his Bible and turned his cold grey eyes on the young man.

"It is a bad thing to be profane," he said gravely, "it leads a man to hell." The remark was matter-of-fact. The man believed what he said.

Robert Waring, who followed Omar in his philosophy of taking threats to hell and hopes of Paradise lightly, bowed his head in acquiescence, for it would not do for the new overseer to differ too soon with his employer over questions of doctrine. Robert Waring had his way to make in the world, and intended to make it; he had done exceedingly well already to secure employment with this Boer farmer, better by far than he had anticipated when he first arrived in Johannesburg. He had thrown up a good land agency in England because he chanced to quarrel with his cousin, the owner's eldest son, so the humour seized him to try his luck abroad—to build up a fortune. He was not penniless, far from it. But he aspired to be thought so. Then if good things were going he might hear of them. Men are secretive before others who can profit by their talk,

while they loose their tongues to the pauper, dazzling him with the glitter of the opportunity he is too crippled to seize. Waring had heard, whether truly or falsely he was yet to discover, that gold had been found on Simeon Krillet's land, gold the old man refused to believe in, or, at any rate, to tear up his fields to find. To discover the facts of the case Waring had willingly accepted a wretched wage, and Krillet, who loved to beat down men, never guessed that the English overseer could have bought his master out and out.

A tall, strong man, Robert Waring, with crisp brown hair, warm with ruddy lights in it; long, powerful arms that had pulled in his college boat at Oxford, and a good chest measurement. His chin was the chin of a fighter, and his mouth equally determined; forehead broad, nose well cut; eyes, the colour of them a deep brown—inscrutable eyes to read.

"That's a fine bit of poetry," Waring said after a pause. "I don't know what made me laugh. Perhaps waking up to hear the creak of the wagon echoing the best love-song ever written. I wonder what she was like, the beautiful Shulamite?" He spoke rather dreamily. The heat of the morning, the rhythmical sway of the wagon, the peculiar yellow light, all made him feel vague and hazy, and he wanted to talk to this Boer farmer as he would have talked to a Swinburne lover.

Simeon Krillet spat out a blade of grass he had been chewing, then answered deliberately, his loose bony hands clutching each other tightly.

"It's not a love-song! By no means! As for the woman, she must have been like Deborah." His voice softened curiously as he pronounced the name. Waring looked up surprised.

"Deborah?" he asked wonderingly. "What Deborah? Not the lady who inspired Jael?"

"Deborah Krillet—my wife!" The cold eyes caught a gleam as the old man spoke, and he quoted solemnly, "Thou art all fair, my love: there is no spot in thee."

Again Waring nearly felt betrayed into merriment. He had a lively recollection of some of the wives of Boer farmers. He had already come across many in Johannesburg. They were huge stout women, their large, dull faces rolling in fat, big, prominent busts, thick fingers, heavy waddling walk. Then his mind conjured up a flashing vision of the fair dead Shulamite. She must have been slim and graceful as a reed, and he could imagine the shell-like delicate breasts, the dainty hips, the sweep of her fair, soft hair, and the eyes, those "doves' eyes" the royal lover sang of. She would be fragrant as spice, fresh as morning. But the woman of Simeon Krillet's fancy! Waring shrugged his shoulders at the mere thought. Then he recollected that, after all, it was just as well that a man should idealise his lifelong companion. But surely not at the

expense of the exquisite Shulamite. That was unbearable. Aloud he said—

“You are married, then? I didn’t know.”

“Married? Of course I am married,” answered the other, with slow astonishment, even as a patriarch of the past might. “I buried my first wife—a good woman—some eighteen months ago. I have only been married to Deborah a little over a year. You are not married—but betrothed, surely?”

Robert Waring laughed. The idea that he should tell this Boer farmer of delightful Joan Desborough was almost humorous.

“I should think not, Mr. Krillet; no wife for me till I can afford to keep her in comfort. It’s a selfish thing to marry till one can do that, and horribly unfair on the woman.”

“Foolish talk.” Simeon Krillet was painfully conclusive. “God made the woman for the man. Why deprive yourself of the woman He meant you to have? Foolish! foolish!” He shook his grey head. “We don’t think much of unmarried people here,” he went on sternly. “You ought to take a wife, young man. It’s only natural.”

“Have you any children?” Robert asked, as much to change the subject as out of curiosity, though he remembered, as he spoke, that Krillet had been spoken of as childless.

A red, painful flush swept over the old man’s cheeks. “I have buried five infants in the long field, left of the farm,” he said slowly. “Two

lived a few weeks, the others died at birth ; but it was God's will, and Deborah as yet is childless. But we shall see." He seemed to glance hopefully forward, and to the complex temperament of Robert Waring there was something peculiarly fascinating in this primitive directness. It brought Waring back to the early days of the world's history. This Krillet, in his way, was the sort of man Abraham or Jacob must have been, or a man living his own life bound about by the Mosaic law.

The wagon creaked on, lulling both men to sleep again.

CHAPTER II

LOVE AND THE STRANGER

EARLY in the afternoon Waring rose and sat by the Kaffir driver to get impressions, just as he would have wandered into a picture-gallery at home. But he soon tired of the deadly monotony of the plain, and the grit of the dust got into his eyes and under his shirt, till he thought longingly of cold water. After a while, however, he became fascinated by the monotony, which had at first bored him.

Darkness fell just as the wagon toiled on to a small kopje. Here at its foot lay Simeon Krillet's lonely homestead. In the brooding dark Waring got a hazy impression, first of stone-walled sheep kraals, and then of black patches, which he knew must be Kaffir huts. His eye caught the zinc roof of the large wagon-house and the dim outline of many outbuildings, then lighted on the homestead. It was a large, square-built dwelling, with a corrugated roof. A brick wall ran round in front, enclosing a poor attempt at a garden, but the night treated this garden tenderly, and brought out a faint sweet

odour of flowers. Sloping behind the farmhouse were more sheep kraals, nearly swallowed up now in night; to the right a little orchard of trees.

The arrival of the wagon brought a host of Kaffir boys to the spot. They streamed out, clamorous as monkeys, from their huts, and in a second, as it seemed, light appeared to break and flash out of the windows of the farmhouse. Evidently Simeon Krillet was master in his own home.

Waring stole a short glance at him as he climbed out of the wagon. There was a feverish excitement in the man's eyes that he could hardly fathom, a nervous impatience that he had not expected, and Krillet ran up to the door more as a young man runs than an old one, and hammered on it with his fist, crying out in a strained voice—

“Deborah, Deborah—open!”

The door was hastily unbarred, and Waring saw a woman standing in the passage, a woman with a lamp in her hand.

For a moment the bright light in the night dazzled him. Then he made out that the woman was very young, indeed a girl. The lamp lit up her face, and made her fair hair shine like a halo of pale gold. He caught a gleam of vivid red lips and the exceeding whiteness of a long throat. The next second Simeon Krillet, uttering a hoarse cry—the cry in which a man's passion bursts forth—had caught the girl in his arms, and was straining her to him, pressing his old

lips to her brow and face, forgetful or neglectful of Waring.

"Deborah ! you have missed me, Deborah ?"

She laughed lightly in answer, a cool, clear laugh, the laugh of the girl more than the woman ; then raised her lamp a little, so that its light fell on the man outside and more clearly revealed her face and form. Seeing Robert Waring, she started back with a little cry, and the young man started too. "My God !" he muttered half out loud, "the Shulamite herself !"

Deborah Krillet sat in the verandah making pretence to sew, but she put few stitches into the large linen handkerchief, and it looked as if her husband would have to wait for some time for the completed set.

The blazing sun treated her kindly, or rather she had no blemish for the merciless light to reveal, not a freckle even on the pure white skin, not a wrinkle on the rounded delicate throat. She wore a cool print gown, the foundation white, sprigged with lilac ; her waist looked all the slighter for the mauve ribbon twisted round, and her lilac sun-bonnet suited the oval of her face.

Nature only knows what miracle of birth had sown such a girl in a Boer colony. She was as unlike those coarse, fat "tantes," her kinswomen, as a windflower to a peony. In nature also Deborah Krillet possessed an inborn refinement to which none of her relations could

lay claim. A drop of Oriental blood in her veins, perhaps, for her mother's family history was vague.

She was cold, cold as the water at the bottom of the well—that was the verdict of all who knew her. A strangely quiet woman, who watched everything with calm, grey eyes, and yet the eyes could blaze and the thin lips curl scornfully; but the wrath of Deborah Krillet got no further than silent speech of eye and mouth, for she was not of the women who rejoice in clamour of tongue, and love the sound of their voices.

The Kaffir servants feared her, one and all. She was so silent when displeased, and they did not understand such silence; also the weight of her little finger fell heavy, and her eyes pierced out the weak spot in an armour of lies, and had small mercy on transgressors.

But her little Kaffir maid loved her, loved her as passionately and as faithfully as a dog would, crouched at her feet with dog-like devotion by day, and lay outside her door at night. To this little maid Deborah represented all the beauty in the world. She was glorious without and within, a king's daughter to this bondswoman; and the woman in her way was fond of the Kaffir—at least, she would have missed her had the girl died.

Now, as she crouched in the verandah, watching her mistress, the Kaffir wondered why she was working so listlessly at her sewing, and she

noticed that her whole face bore the expressive look of one who listens and waits. Yet what was there to listen or wait for? In a little while the sun would go down, and night run in like a trail of black, and it would be evening instead of dawn. That was all that was likely to happen.

And yet a flush of pink colour had made Deborah Krillet's cheeks marvellously like apple-blossom, and her hands were twitching nervously—those cold, firm little hands; also, she had thrown her head back as though to catch the faint sound of distant footsteps.

What was that note carried so clearly through the quivering air, that note of song? The little Kaffir maid pricked up her ears. Oh, it was only the new overseer singing, the big Englishman who had been with them a fortnight. He was coming up from the sheep kraals, and singing as he came.

She looked up unsuspiciously at her mistress, a broad smile on her protruding lips; for was it not just like a mad Englishman to sing as he went about his work, as if work could ever be a pleasure? But no answering smile curved the lips of Deborah Krillet; instead, her face darkened, and she bent lower over her work.

"Oh! what's the greatest pleasure
The tongue o' man can name?
'Tis to kiss a bonny lassie
When the kye comes hame."

The rich tenor voice pealed out musically.

The singer would soon be turning the corner and coming in sight. The Kaffir did not understand English, but the white woman did. She and her husband had both some knowledge of the language, enough at least to enable her to understand the old Scotch song. Why did the singer put such richness of passion in it, and make it a song to stir the blood, to pulse the heart? It was waste of breath; it was foolishness.

The young wife rose to her feet and stood erect a second, shading her eyes from the hot sun rays, the handkerchief she was working at falling to the ground as Robert Waring turned the corner. He strode forward, a figure of bronze in the flame of sunshine, tall, straight, and muscular. His brown hair lay back against his forehead in moist tendrils, his throat was bare, and one little bead of sweat had gathered upon it. He looked the man to whom the soil belongs, that strong man, the conqueror.

The Kaffir maid started. God in heaven! what had brought that look—the look into her mistress's eyes, the look that a woman turns on the man to whom she would belong? She stared at Deborah, feeling her world spin round, realising what it all meant; then a strange thing happened. Deborah Krillet had picked up her work, smoothed it out with quiet, steady fingers, and gone quietly inside the house, and so avoided meeting the man who was coming.

The little maid rubbed her hot face. She could understand her mistress's expression and the look in her eyes, for it was as primitive as passion itself, but she couldn't understand her action. If a woman likes a man she wants to be with him, within touch of his hand and sound of his voice, but Deborah had gone away of her free will. Dear Lord, what was the meaning of it all?

Robert Waring sat down on one of the rocking-chairs in the verandah and felt the lazy content that follows a day of toil. It was a pure delight to stretch out his legs and get cool; later on would come appreciation of the red glare of sunset; just now he was only alive to purely physical sensations. He noticed the little Kaffir, and made a sign to her; she grinned from ear to ear, and nodded her head vehemently to show she understood his meaning. In a few moments she was bathing his hot feet in a tub of water. The refreshing drip of the water was delicious. He was awake enough to outside things by now to take a pleasure in the girl's grotesque ugliness; it had the quaint beauty of exaggerated line.

He was enjoying, as only a man of his nature could, the present situation. As far as discovering gold on Simeon Krillet's farm went, he fancied the quest hopeless. It was only a Johannesburg canard, one of those wild stories that crop up in a land whose bowels and veins are of gold. Yet he was not sorry he had

followed a will-o'-the-wisp, and hired himself out as a servant, for the experience was worth the months he intended to devote to it—the four months of harvest. After the stress and strain of complex modern existence, the life out here was delightful. It was like starting at the beginning of things.

He was intensely interested in Simeon Krillet, for Robert Waring, who had studied Renan's *Life of Christ* and dabbled in Buddhism, was delighted to come into contact with a man who believed firmly in Adam and Eve, and swore by the law of Moses. That Simeon Krillet was hard, mean, and cruel did not affect Waring's interest in the least.

The Kaffirs, too—what an interesting herd of black brutes they were, regarded by the Boers as pretty well soulless, and treated accordingly! He liked to pass by their kraals at nightfall and observe the man, the woman, and their young. What a bubble of life was always going on there! They chattered like monkeys, these Kaffir folk, but they had humour in their eyes and the joy of the epicurean at their heart. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." That was their creed, and if they were only earth-worms they took pleasure in trifles, and so were wiser than most philosophers.

CHAPTER III

CONCERNING A PARIS DRESS

Now, as to Deborah Krillet, or, as he still called her to himself, "the Shulamite," what a study she was! The apple of an old man's eye, yet the woman who ought to have slept on a young man's breast, for such beauty as hers should never be wasted on old age. It is a sin against nature.

He didn't understand her character yet, nor, indeed, anything about her. She was always very quiet. Sometimes he thought her a deep and cynical woman, at other times a beautiful fool. He thought she avoided him needlessly, and was painfully cold in her manner; perhaps she was afraid he would make love to her. If so, she was remarkably foolish. He was not of the type that makes love to other men's wives; besides, there was a girl in England. He wondered sometimes how Deborah came to appreciate beauty, as she did without doubt, for he had watched her lips part over the first sight of a newly-opened flower, and her eyes glisten curiously when the sky was flaring with sunset

or pale pink with dawn. She had read very little, and he sometimes felt that was all the better, for he had an idea that if she really did any thinking at all her thoughts would be wonderfully fresh and startling, original, and not borrowed from books. He wondered if she really cared for her husband. She was dutiful enough in manner to the old man, but Waring fancied that once or twice her eyes had mocked him as he raged against some unlucky Kafir, or poured out a rhapsody of prayer on the Sabbath afternoon. Certainly she seemed to shrink ever so slightly from his rough endearments, but that might have been from feminine delicacy.

"She is a singular creature," he wrote in his rough diary, just before he left his bedroom that evening to go down to supper. "Another study of the eternal feminine. Old Krillet confided to me to-day that she has not yet put on the mauve silk dress—Paris—he bought her in Johannesburg. I can imagine the sort of garment, too, and consider Mrs. Krillet a wise woman; still, the poor old husband is painfully disappointed—but as he lashed a Kaffir woman with his own whip this afternoon for spilling a milk-can, I do not regret his gnat-bite. She, Mrs. Krillet, has not spoken to me all day. I feel half inclined to tell her about Joan. I wonder how my dainty, tea-gown, chiffony girl would look in the Boer woman's lilac print dress, or *vice versâ*? It would be odd to see the two girls together, for Deborah, I beg her pardon, Mrs. Krillet—is only

about seventeen, though she might be forty from her cold manner. How delightful it will be to hear Joan's laugh again; the Boer women don't laugh—they giggle hideously. The Shulamite, to do her justice, avoids that pitfall. Her laugh is musical."

That was the first note that Robert Waring ever entered about Deborah in his diary.

It was cool and pleasant on the verandah after supper, and Simeon Krillet, according to his custom, sat there, his wife sewing by his side. Robert Waring stretched himself out in another long hammock chair. Sunlight was deepening in a long flush of red, and behind the streaks of wounded crimson rolled up the grey-black drappings of night. A small moon was beginning to peep out, and one or two stars had already commenced to shine. Everything was very still; once or twice a light breath rustled the leaves in the orchard or stirred the grass, and that was all.

"This was the day I buried my first-born—in the field yonder." Simeon Krillet had broken the silence. He pointed a long finger at the family burial-ground, where so many generations of Krillets were sleeping—that harvest-field of death. "He only drew a few breaths, and his life went out," the old man went on stolidly. "Well, the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord; but—there have been Krillets here since my great grandfather first settled in the strange land that was to become our home, and God grant——"

He said no more, but his eyes took on the hunger of the childless man. Robert, watching Deborah, noticed that her lips tightened. Either she felt as her husband, or the subject offended her.

"How quiet it is," he remarked, to change the subject. "How wonderfully still—a night for poets, dreamers or lovers."

"Deborah,"—the old man had turned suddenly to his wife,—“why don't you wear the dress I bought you? There's not another woman with one to match it, and I like you to go fine."

"It does not suit me. Also, it is not suitable!" Her voice was very clear and cold, but it roused Waring to attention.

"It is suitable, if I tell you to wear it." The husband's voice was obstinate, and he looked hard at the girl. "If I say wear silk, you wear silk; and if I say wear cotton, you wear cotton! Do you hear me, Deborah? Now go up and change."

The Englishman flushed with annoyance. He did not care to hear a woman spoken to like this. It went against him.

"I don't think Mrs. Krillet could possibly improve on her present frock," he said coolly. But neither the man nor the woman took the least notice of his remark, though he thought Deborah's breast heaved a little as she rose to her feet obediently and passed into the house.

Simeon Krillet laughed. "She must know I am master," he said good-humouredly. "Yes, she must know that. She is dear to me. Ah!

the good Lord knows how dear; but she must obey. Women were born to obey their husbands and bear children. This dress, now. She used to like the silks I bought her before. Whims, whims! A man must never give way to his wife's whims! No—he must be master!” As the old Boer grunted on he lit his pipe, and then lay back in his chair with half-shut eyes. Waring with difficulty restrained himself from kicking him.

It was dark on the verandah by now, deep shadows gathering in every corner, long shadows stealing over the countryside, and in the darkness Deborah slipped back softly. She rustled slowly forward, but it was impossible to see if the dress suited her or not. However, Simeon Krillet grunted out approval, then lay further back in his chair, obviously half asleep.

It grew very dark on the verandah, and the silence deeper. Suddenly Robert Waring felt that a woman was weeping. Though he could not have said so for certain, in himself he knew it; and the tears were slow, heavy tears; he knew that too.

Simeon Krillet began to snore loudly, and the sound was sacrilege to the night; it grated horribly on the Englishman's nerves. Possibly it grated on Deborah, for she rose softly to her feet and stole away in the direction of the sheep kraals. The instinct came on Robert Waring to follow her, and he obeyed this instinct.

When he came up to Deborah she was leaning

over the low stone wall, gazing into the black darkness of the kraal. All at once a flashing of the moon from a cloud revealed the slim grace of her young form, the exquisite pose of her neck. Waring, who worshipped beauty, felt inclined to kneel to her; he would have felt the same had she been carved in marble and no breathing, human woman.

Deborah Krillet turned her head and looked at him, then pointed her finger at the white fleecy specks that were sheep.

"What are we alive for?" she asked bitterly. "The sheep, the Kaffirs, you and I? I wish I had never been born."

"Why do you wish that?" he asked softly, surprised by her sudden mood, and most of all by her confiding in him.

"Because," she answered coldly, "I cannot understand myself, and it is hateful to be shut up day and night with a puzzle."

"You are very young." He knew his words were bathos, but what could he say? "The years will help you to understand yourself better," he added.

"Yes," she replied, with a little shiver, "perhaps they will, but I don't look forward to them."

"Are you—happy?" He pressed near her in the soft moonlight, partly because she was fair and young, partly because her breast was heaving and he wanted to comfort her.

"Happy!" Her voice was almost ironical. "What have I got to make me happy? I am

treated like a toy now because I am new, and later on I shall be broken because I am a woman—broken and beaten; and I ought not to mind or complain, that is the terrible part of it. It is God's will; He made us for man's pleasure."

"That—oh, that's a lie," interrupted Waring with vehemence.

She turned her frightened, startled eyes on him, eyes into which sudden daring flashed.

"How can it be a lie?" she asked slowly. "It is in the Book."

Her speech brought Waring up sharp. How are you to deal with a girl who believes firmly in the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, and has no understanding of the Christ man—a girl whose mind throbs with modern revolt against the status of her sex? The problem was interesting.

"We must talk over things together," he said gently. "Believe me, Mrs. Krillet, it hurts me to see a woman pained; men were made to serve women on their knees. The whole beauty of life is revealed to us by women, for that's their destiny—to beautify, not to serve; to be adored and pleaded to by man!" He didn't realise that his modern cult of speech sounded like a lover's cry to the girl; he only noticed that she trembled, and that something flashed into her eyes—something that gleamed like flame.

The moon went behind a cloud, and it was darkness all around them—palpitating, cloaking darkness. He slipped her warm arm gently into

nis, not from any idea of a vulgar flirtation, only feeling a curious sense of protection steal over him.

"Ah!" she murmured half reluctantly, then leaned her weight against him. "Let us go back," she whispered after a moment.

"Presently," he answered soothingly, for he hated to feel her quiver and tremble so, and he grudged her to the Boer farmer and his rough brutality. "I want to hear you say we are going to be friends first. I want you to tell me all your troubles; will you?"

"Another time. Oh, it's dark—dark!"

"The darkness is very beautiful," he answered in low tones. Then in a still lower voice, "And you are very beautiful."

She made no answer, but it seemed as if she leaned closer.

"Deborah! Deborah! Where are you?" the loud harsh voice of Simeon Krillet rang out, tearing across the night, jarring its calm. And after a second he called out again, "Deborah!"

"He has awoken," remarked Waring calmly.

"Yes," she murmured, "he has awoken."

CHAPTER IV

MOTH AND CANDLE

DEBORAH KRILLET sat under the scanty shade afforded by some karroo bushes. Around her the sheep were feeding peacefully; she could hear their crisp munch of the grass. She smiled as she listened. She was in the mood to smile at everything, for suddenly the world had changed from a grey world into a golden. She had been asleep, it seemed to her now, asleep ever since her childhood; but she was awake, and she knew whose coming had stirred her to life.

She knew it was wrong, but—and here the firm delicate lips tightened—let Deborah Krillet have her portion in the lake of fire and brimstone if she won thereby a summer on earth, a perfect summer. Everything has to be paid for, guilty love amongst the rest, and here was a woman perfectly prepared to pay the price.

Robert Waring strode across the field, and she walked forward to meet him. She was not aware—how should she be?—that she was only an interesting character study to him—a beauti-

ful bit of nature. She had never yet met a man who was gentle to a woman unless she had aroused his passion and his love. Homage and chivalry to women were unknown words to the men of her race, so she misunderstood Waring as completely as he misunderstood her. She held herself well in hand, and suffered not a love glance to escape. The man must woo, the woman yield, that was her creed, the neat garment in which she shrouded her passion.

"Come and look at the mealies," said Waring, "they are simply glorious, a field of shimmering, shining gold. After all's said and done, you do get some fine colour effects in this bare, far-stretching land. I'm glad I came out, very glad."

They were walking together now in the direction of the mealie patch, and at the man's lightly-uttered words that delicate apple-blossom flush again lit up Deborah's cheek, for a man wouldn't be glad that he had crossed the ocean merely to look at a field of waving gold. No, he must have some warmer, better reason.

"I also am glad you came," she answered, in her cool, clear voice, the voice that betrayed her nature so little. "You have opened the door of so many new rooms; each book you have lent me has shown me something I never dreamed of before, and I should have got very cramped kneeling in a Kaffir hut all my life, shouldn't I?"

He liked the quaint imagery of her talk, and also to feel that she had appreciated the volume

of Shakespeare and the few books he had brought with him to the lonely farm.

"I should like to take you into a large library, a real library in England," he said, smiling, "and watch you flit from book to book, sipping the honey just like a greedy bee. What a shame it is to think of all the wonderful stories and romances you have never read, the books you ought to have laughed and wept over."

"Yes, I have missed a good deal," she laughed, "but I have the future."

"Yes, the future." He shook his head rather gloomily, for he was honestly sorry for the girl. "But I shall hate to go back to England and think of you here, for you don't belong to this sort of life a bit. It's odd, but you don't, you know."

She shot a keen, sharp glance at him.

"No, I don't belong to this sort of life"—she quoted his own words slowly—"for, according to my husband, I have no business to read a love story, even written by your Shakespeare. He struck me this morning because I refused to promise to read no more. He believes women should only read the Prayer Book and the Bible." Her lips curled mockingly, and she laughed.

CHAPTER V

A WOMAN'S WAY

"HE struck you? The brute!" Waring's face darkened savagely, and he bent tenderly over the bruised arm, touching it as softly and as gently as a woman would.

"Yes, and he will strike me again." There was an odd note of triumph in her voice, as if she rejoiced over the weapon Fate had put in her hand. "For he says he will be master, and his wife must obey him. He is quite right; it is the theory we are all brought up to believe in, and most of the women accept it cheerfully. You see, it simplifies life so for them, quite prevents their ever having to think. Only—well," she paused, "I wonder why God made me so different to these women; rather a mistake, as I am of their blood."

"I thought your husband loved you, worshipped you." Waring was still holding the warm white arm, passing his fingers gently over the satin-smooth flesh.

"So he does," she laughed half impatiently. "There were tears in his eyes when he struck

me, and if he takes up his whip and lashes me to-morrow—don't wince, it is quite likely—he will feel the pain as much as I shall; but it is his rule: his own must obey him. He shot his favourite dog because the poor brute refused to follow one day, and he will lash me into obedience, or try to."

"I'd kill him first, Deborah. I had no idea——" The Englishman, looking straight at the girl, saw nothing but a woman shamefully wronged, a weak, delicate creature whom it behoved a man to protect, and he called her by her name because her personality clung to it. But Deborah, glancing at the man's set face and listening to his words, saw in him the lover for whom she would burn in hell.

"Thou shalt do no murder." She whispered the commandment softly. "After all, what does a little bodily pain matter? He can only hurt my flesh; my soul is beyond his touch. Why should I mind?"

"If he lays a finger on you again I will kill him."

The man spoke quite calmly, but the woman knew that he meant what he said. She drew in her breath sharply. Robert Waring must not stain his hands with blood; that at any cost she must prevent, and her woman's wit saw a way.

"He shall not touch me again," she said quietly, "that I swear to you. You shall not be guilty of the sin of bloodshed for my sake."

She pulled her arm from his grasp as she spoke, and drew the sleeve down over the ugly mark.

"How can you stop him?" he asked anxiously.

"By a lie," came the quiet answer.

That evening Deborah Krillet, sitting in her bedroom, reading at the window by the clear, streaming light of the African moon, suddenly became conscious of the presence of her husband. The old man had come quietly into the room, and was now facing her, a peculiar expression on his face, the look of a man who is going to hurt the thing he loves, and is bound to do so by the force of the nature he cannot control.

Deborah Krillet looked up calmly into the man's face and set her mind to the task before her. Down below she could hear the slow tramp of Robert Waring's footsteps as he paced up and down the verandah, and she knew that her first scream of pain would bring him to her help, and then—— Why then, God help Simeon Krillet and Robert Waring, for the old man would be helpless in the other's hands, as helpless as his murderer later under the finger of God, the God who has cursed all the descendants of Cain.

She was to blame for the position of affairs. She had brought it about herself, and put the soul of the man she loved in jeopardy, for simply to arouse his deepest love by an appeal to his feelings had she bared the bruised arm in the mealie field. To tempt Waring to love

her would not damn his soul according to her creed, for only on the woman, the sinning wife, would God's curse fall. But to arouse him to murder—she shivered.

"You are frightened? I don't wonder. I told you not to read any of these light books." Simeon Krillet spoke in contemptuous tones, but he looked away from his wife as he addressed her, for her beauty was maddening in the moonlight, and the golden glory of her fair hair streaming loose over her white nightdress weakened his iron strength, the strength that had to crush all opposition.

"I am not frightened, Simeon." She shut up the little pocket Shakespeare and rose to her feet, a strangely dignified little figure. "I have done no harm. Why should I not read a good book? It is wrong to prevent me."

"It is not a good book. It is a play-acting book. A book for light women to read. Besides, I have told you not to open it, and I will be obeyed. Deborah, you must obey me." He spoke with pleading, for after all, he loved this weak, obstinate thing. How he loved her!

"Simeon,"—she had caught his large hairy hand and was imploring him passionately,— "don't be too hard on me. I'm not like your first wife or the women you know, content to live the life of an animal. I want to be allowed to read and understand things. I was getting stifled; and now these books are making me breathe. Simeon, dear Simeon, let me read

and live a little in a new world, and on my knees I swear I'll make you the better wife—oh, on my knees!" She flung herself on the ground at his feet, and had he yielded to her prayer, out of pure gratitude she would have forgotten the man whose footsteps tramped outside.

CHAPTER VI

THE CREAKING STAIR

BUT Simeon Krillet was not the man to yield. "I have told you I will not have you reading these books," he said suddenly, "and I must be obeyed. A wife must obey her husband." Then with a sudden change of mood and tone, "Deborah, haven't I been good to you? I married you without a ticky of silver, brought you here and made you mistress over sheep and oxen, women-servants and men-servants." He was falling half unconsciously into rich biblical phrase. "I have dressed you in fine silks, you who went barefoot on your step-brother's farm. You have had my heart to tread on, my money to spend, my food to eat, and yet you say you are stifled and want books—books—books." He turned abruptly and opened the drawers of a huge wooden chest, pulling out with rough haste pieces of cut silk, long ends of ribbon, pieces of lace, artificial flowers, throwing down these feminine trophies on the floor. "See, what haven't I given you?" he went on bitterly. "More than any other woman you know."

"And what are these gifts to me?" she cried fiercely. "Give me what I ask for, the freedom of mind I covet."

He caught her by the slim waist and raised his hand over her head.

"For the dear Lord's sake, don't tempt me to strike you," he cried, "but obey me cheerfully, as Sarah obeyed Abraham. Be a rose of fragrance to me, Deborah, and a bundle of myrrh. Give up your ungodly reading; swear to obey me from henceforth."

"I won't, I won't." The words came sharp from her small mouth as she struggled to her feet and gazed at him defiantly.

"Then I'll whip you, whip you like a dog or a Kaffir," he shouted fiercely, "whip you till the blood streams over the tender flesh I love. But, by the God above, I'll be master, and my will your will."

"You may whip me, torture me, or kill me," she replied steadily, "but you will never make me obey you blindly. Now for the whip; now for brutal strength! Oh, my God, if I wasn't a woman!" She mocked him with her scorn even whilst she trembled like a leaf.

He walked across the room and took up the heavy whip that hung in one corner, muttering to himself as he did so, and drawing his hand across his damp brow. "It must be fought out," he urged himself fiercely, "she must be taught her lesson; but it's terrible, terrible." The man's face was terrible to gaze at, too; his

body seemed to be torn by love and pride, and the agony of the conflict was writ in his eyes. He hesitated even as he stretched out his arm to unhook the whip, and a quiver passed through his long frame.

Deborah picked up a piece of silk from the floor, and as she waited, tore it into fragments; the rending of the silk alone broke the silence that had come over the room. The large wooden bed looked ghostly in the moonlight, so too the chest of drawers and the huge wooden press. The floor was covered with a gaudy and hideous Brussels carpet, another of those gifts that the old Boer had given his wife. Just now the great pink roses were only blurred shadows, and the crudeness of colour lost in the glimmer of moonlight.

Suddenly the girl paled, and a look of absolute terror came into her defiant eyes. No dread of the whip, no shrinking from bodily pain had caused her face to blanch and her heart to bound up to her throat—only—— The steps had ceased to tramp the verandah, the steps were coming up the stair, and the first crack of her husband's whip would prelude the entrance of Robert Waring.

Desperation gave her courage, the courage to lie for love's sake.

"Simeon," she whispered, her breast panting under the loose nightgown, her eyes shining like stars, moist stars, "are you really going to whip me—to whip me?" She was pressing

both hands on her heaving bosom, and her face was almost unearthly in its white set resolve.

"I am," he answered steadily, "though I love every hair of your head."

"But you mustn't." She was speaking now in quick, frightened tones. "Listen, Simeon, you know those little graves out in the field where all the Krillets are buried, those five small graves——"

"Deborah!" He was looking at her intently, the whip falling from his hand, a wild light breaking over his stern, rigid face.

"Do you want to dig a bigger grave yet, Simeon," she went on, with a wild hysterical laugh, "a grave for a woman and her unborn child? If so—use your whip."

"My wife—Deborah!" He was on his knees, bowed, shaken, broken, kissing her little bare feet, trembling as he had never trembled in all his life before.

The girl shivered through and through, for it was the first lie she had ever uttered, and the magnitude of her sin was on her. She could hardly endure the man's touch; all she wanted now was to be left alone in the dark, to the cool and heal of the dark.

"I feel faint," she muttered, pushing away his hand that had now sought hers; "I feel faint."

"The dear Lord, what wonder! Oh, little Deborah, my Deborah." He took her up in his strong lean arms and carried her to her bed, laying her down gently, then bent and kissed her cold forehead with almost pathetic reverence.

"Let me lie still," she murmured, with a flash of irritation.

"Surely, surely." He looked at her as a Catholic would gaze at the Holy Mother herself, then with a sudden fierceness of surrender crossed the room and picked up the volume of Shakespeare which still lay on the ground. He smiled, the weak smile of Samson shorn, as he approached the bed, then slipped the book into the girl's hand. Her fingers closed on it listlessly.

"Your will is my will now, Deborah," he whispered, softening his hard voice, "always and ever now."

Simeon Krillet moved over to the window. He gazed out at the stretching fields which his father had owned, and his father's father before him, the fields that shone white like a winding-sheet under the light of the full moon, and his heart sang praise to God, for, please the dear Lord, a Krillet would plant and sow, reap and garner, when he would be sleeping with his fathers; yes, a Krillet would own the soil. Involuntarily he let his thoughts escape in one triumphant cry—

"Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." He turned to Deborah, so that she might whisper a low "Amen," but the girl had not heard him; she was listening to something else, the sound of retreating footsteps, treading a creaking stair.

CHAPTER VII

A CHILD AND HER TOYS

"WOMEN and their ways, women and their ways," pondered Robert Waring. A week had passed since he had listened at Deborah Krillet's door and heard her swear what he had guessed to be a lie—an uneasy, restless week for the Englishman as well as for the other actors in the crude drama that was being played in the lonely farm on the plain.

They watched each other stealthily, those three persons, wondering how the situation would develop—Simeon Krillet passionately tender of his wife, the girl sullen or nervous by fits, Waring himself curiously watchful and vaguely uneasy.

He was thankful that the old Boer had decided to send him to the town beyond the hills to buy some needful stores, glad that he would have to set out at dawn. The tension of the last week had been horrible. Try as he would, he could not help feeling that some sort of tragedy was looming in the air; sooner or later Krillet would discover a certain truth—and then ?

He watched Deborah closely, marvelling how she had courage to play her part, wondering how soon her nerve would fail. All this evening he had been observing how restlessly her fingers twitched, and how she started at the least sound. He was glad to get away to his room. Fortunately, as at all Boer homesteads, Simeon Krillet went to bed early, and this evening was no exception.

It was not yet ten o'clock. Waring, accustomed to go to bed when the London sparrows begin to wake, had no desire to sleep, notwithstanding the fact that he was to start at daybreak. He was not fond of the huge bed, the only good piece of furniture in his small, bare room; he had an uneasy conviction that more than one Krillet had died in it, and the feather mattress was distinctly stuffy. According to his usual custom, he was about to open his small valise and draw out the diary in which he jotted the day's reflections, when a low knock at the door caught his ear.

"Come in," he cried, wondering for a second who would enter. His visitor chanced to be no less a person than Simeon Krillet. The Boer advanced slowly into the room, an uncertain look in his face, as if he had not quite made up his mind what to do or say, an unwonted hesitation in his manner. He did not speak for a second, but stood by the open window, looking out on the plain that gleamed silver in the moonlight, rubbing his thin, long

hands together. When he spoke he did not look at Waring; his eyes were fixed instead on the little graveyard where his children slept, the children born only to die.

"Women are fanciful"—he was half apologetic, half defiant—"but a man must humour them—sometimes." He laid stress on the last word.

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Waring blankly. He wished he knew what had brought the other to his room, but did not like to ask.

There was a long spell of silence. The white African moon made everything look cold and ghostly; intense silence seemed to brood over the farm and plain. All at once Krillet turned.

"Deborah has her fancies like the rest. Now, do you think, would it be possible,"—he spoke with a shade of hesitation,—"*there might be a chance that you could buy her a book, maybe two or three, at the town? Not that I hold with the reading of vain books but—just now.*" His voice softened, and for the first time Waring caught a glimpse of the man's tragedy, as well as the woman's; it made the Englishman pitiful.

"I see; you want me to purchase a few volumes for Mrs. Krillet to read? She must be lonely sometimes, you out so much."

"Why should she be? There is her sewing. My first wife was not lonely, nor my wife's mother, or, indeed, my own mother, good women all." The man spoke simply, yet with a certain primitive dignity.

"But perhaps Mrs. Krillet has a different

temperament," Waring remarked slowly. "She does not look like most of her countrywomen." As he spoke he quoted slowly to himself the verse from the Song of Songs which the Boer had applied to his wife: "Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely; thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks."

"You are right," Simeon Krillet answered with deliberation. "Deborah is not like most women, though she will be so later,"—he shook his head wisely. "She will not want books when she has a child to rear. Till then she must have her way." He took out a heavy leather purse and fumbled for some money. "Get good books, though; no profane trash, no tales of light women and bad men. I can trust you." He looked up at Waring rather anxiously, proffering a handful of coins.

"I have never bought books," he added helplessly, "so do not know their price, but get some in fine binding, purple covers or red, yes, and with gilt edges. Deborah would like gilt edges."

Waring forbore to smile. The whole scene was pathetic, the whole story. What had Fate been about to link such a man and woman together?

"I'll do my best to get volumes you would approve of," he answered frankly, "and books that will please Mrs. Krillet. You may trust me."

"Yes, yes," muttered Krillet, walking to the door; then, as his hands found the handle, he turned, a red flush on his yellow cheeks. "You will tell her I chose the books—I; and it will be no lie; it is my money that pays, it is my thought."

"Yes, of course," replied Waring hurriedly, "and I expect your wife will be delighted and most grateful to you."

"Perhaps." The door creaked open; Simeon Krillet had gone.

Waring whistled softly, then got out his diary and jotted down the little scene. "All this will make interesting reading later on," he murmured, "when tragedy is not so close at one's elbow." He bit his wooden pencil and went on writing. "Poor pathetic Shulamite, poor beautiful Deborah! What will Krillet say or do when he finds out she has lied to him, and his hopes of a child end in smoke? I wish I could take her to England; she is lost here, all her sweetness wasted. She would be happy in England, making her own life, shaping her own destiny; and she could do both. I know the strength of the little chin; I guess the daring cleverness of her brain; I have witnessed her marvellous self-control. Deborah is a woman in a thousand, and she is prisoned here. Wonderful the decrees of Fate! But perhaps I may help her to escape, and exchange the barren loneliness of the plain for the watered and scented garden." He closed the diary with a

snap, and fastened the silver clasps carefully, then tossed it back into the open valise.

"I must let Joan see that little book one day," he said reflectively. "It will give her a good idea of the working of my brain, the thoughts I have thought, and the dreams I have dreamed. She'll find her own name pretty often, running like a flash of gold through the whole year."

As the young man spoke he drew out a small letter-case from his pocket and shook out the contents impatiently till he came to the photograph of a girl. A very pretty girl; her eyes and hair seemed dark; a lace scarf was draped somewhat artificially about her head and shoulders, and she wore a coronet of diamond stars. The face was very sweet, the lips parted in a smile.

"What a pet you are, Joan!" Waring, with a slight laugh at himself, kissed the likeness passionately, adding, "I wonder what you would say, you dainty, spoilt girl, if you were ever threatened with a whip, like the beautiful Shulamite, or if you would have lied as she did?"

Six hours later Waring started off in the wagon. The whole world appeared heavy with sleep, and even the great oxen seemed only half awake as they gazed at Waring with large, soft eyes that no brutality is able to harden. The Englishman was half asleep too. He yawned as he climbed into the wagon, and thought regretfully of bed.

Simeon Krillet came to see him off. He looked a shambling, unkempt figure as he leaned against the door, his shirt, open at the throat, betraying his lean, hairy chest, the chest of an old man. A feeling of compassion for Deborah left to such sorry companionship made a sudden thought flash through Waring's brain.

"If Mrs. Krillet feels dull or tired," he said quickly, "there are one or two books in my valise she might like to read, an odd Scott and a volume of Emerson. Get them out for her, anyway—there's the key." He tossed the key to Krillet as he spoke; it fell to the ground, making a sharp tinkle of sound. Then the wagon rumbled away across the dreary distance of the plain.

Deborah Krillet, kneeling at her bedroom window, peered furtively under the drawn blind, watched till the wagon became a mere speck of movement, then rose to her feet listlessly, knowing her eyes would hunger for its return a week.

CHAPTER VIII

BOUND IN RUSSIA LEATHER

THEY were chattering like monkeys in the Kaffir huts, but every now and then the sound of a cracking whip made the hum of sound cease for a second, so that during the pause it was easy enough to hear a woman's screams and her loud shrieks for mercy.

Simeon Krillet stood listening on the verandah, and each time the whip cracked he rubbed his hairy hands approvingly, frowning a little when the shrieks rang out too shrill, and gazing up anxiously at his wife's bedroom. He had sent Deborah to lie down till supper-time; he did not want her to know her little Kaffir maid was being flogged by his orders.

She had spilt a foaming can of milk; that was the offence for which such sharp punishment was being wreaked. Yet was it? Had Simeon Krillet not overheard a certain speech that the unlucky girl had made that afternoon, it was highly probable that her back would have escaped the lash.

"The dear Lord," that was what the little

maid had whispered to a dark-skinned old woman as she milked the warm, patient cows, unaware that her master stood on the other side of the fence. "I shall be glad when the Englishman returns; she will be sick at heart till then. Can I not read her face and understand her mind? Foolish? Of course it is foolish, mother, but women are foolish with men."

Krillet had clenched his hands tightly, feeling a furious wave of passion surge over his whole body. So an old crone, sitting on her haunches, past work, and this Kaffir girl, dared to lie about Deborah! He could not hear what the old woman grunted, but after a second the girl took up the thread again.

"He will be back to-morrow and we shall see; oh yes, we shall see. They are both young, mother, and she knows her heart, and will not push joy away. As for the master, he is old and ill-favoured." The girl laughed shrilly. "Why should she love him? Love is a seed blown by the wind, planting itself, and never sown. No, she has not spoken to me; why should she? But I hear her tears fall, that's enough."

Simeon Krillet had slunk away, for he feared what might happen if he stayed. His fingers were strong enough to squeeze the life out of a slim brown throat, and he had no wish to commit murder. Later on the overturned milk-can gave him an opportunity which he took.

He did not for a moment believe what he had heard, or attach the least importance to it; so he had assured himself. Everyone knew what liars Kaffirs are, soulless beasts of labour, not to be considered as human beings at all; besides, if Deborah had been strange in her moods lately, he knew the reason, ja! and an excellent good reason too. The fancy took the old man to walk the length of the fields to the graveyard, and there to sit down and smoke his pipe. As his eye wandered over the small raised tufts of grass under which his dead children slept, his fancy played about the child to be born, and gradually peace came back to his heart, and a fine contentment with nature.

Deborah was sitting on the verandah when he returned. Krillet thought she looked tired and listless; she was certainly very pale. He noticed during supper that the only colour in her face was in her lips, and they looked pure scarlet in consequence. Her eyes were heavy, no sparkle in them or life. Yet they flashed once, when he spoke of Waring's return on the morrow, just as if someone had dashed fire in them.

"Shall you be glad to see him, the Englishman?" Krillet looked at his wife sharply. The little maid behind her chair would have sniggered to herself if the flesh of her back had not been red and raw; as it was, she listened curiously to the reply, wondering what her mistress would say.

"Glad to see him? Yes. He talks of lands where I have never been, of books I have never read, and I see pictures listening to his voice." Deborah spoke in a curiously even tone, but she crumbled her bread nervously. Glad to see the Englishman—glad to see him, when her whole soul hungered for his return and she was sick with a longing for his mere presence! Glad to see him! She could have laughed.

Her answer satisfied Krillet. He rose from the table and beckoned her to follow him out on the verandah. There he took her on his knee, leaning his gaunt head on her warm shoulder, watching the stars with a quiet satisfaction, absolutely content.

Deborah went through hell. She shrank from Krillet as a woman only shrinks when she loves another man; even the touch of his hand had grown to be an offence. She would like to have screamed and torn from him screaming; instead, she tightened her lips and sat up limp and passive, her heart yearning with intolerable bitterness for the absent man, her whole soul full of sick shame, everything blank, and most of all the future.

She shivered at last, and her teeth began to chatter. Krillet, roused from his rosy dreams, noticed this; he rose and put her gently on her feet.

"You're cold, Deborah; run in and go to bed—go at once."

She was glad enough to obey. The verandah,

emptied of her presence, became lonely. Simeon Krillet entered the farm and sat down in the parlour. Suddenly a thought struck him. He heard Deborah's light footsteps moving about restlessly in the chamber overhead. How would it be if he went and got one of the books Robert Waring had offered to lend, and let Deborah read herself to sleep over it? She would be delighted, and it would pave the way for to-morrow's gift.

The man smiled slowly and heavily to himself, then rose and went upstairs with lumbering footsteps; Deborah winced as she heard him ascend, and her heart felt lighter as he passed her door.

Krillet paused a moment before he entered Robert Waring's bedroom, and his eyes fell on a large wooden chest which had its place in the passage. He opened it, his mouth working a little and his hands quivering.

Dead fingers, the fingers of his first wife, had been last at this chest, and she had coffined away hope in it. Tears, scalding tears, had fallen on the tiny soft garments Krillet was touching so tenderly and gingerly.

"God is dealing with me as he dealt with Job," muttered the man to himself. "He has taken away, but He will give. Blessed be the name of the Lord." He closed the chest, thinking he would place it in Deborah's room next morning. What she would find in it would make her feel mother to all things living,

and take the tired look from her face. He had seen women smile and cry over these tiny clothes before. Why should Deborah be different from her sisters? Meanwhile to-night let her have her book; soon she would be as indifferent to books as he was. Directly her fingers touched the baby garments, consecrated as they were by another woman's tears, her heart would warm, and she would realise what was a woman's true mission—to think anything else was impossible.

It was quite dark in Waring's room, and the Boer had to strike a match and light the lamp before he could find the Englishman's valise and begin his hunt for the books. He fumbled for some time with the key, but opened it at last and commenced turning the things over. He was surprised by the texture and quality of some of the clothes he came across, and shook his head wonderingly. What manner of man was Robert Waring to wear silk next his skin at night and a rough shirt by day? It was puzzling—very.

The books—now, where were the books? Searching about, he came upon the little diary. Ah, surely this must be good reading, the man argued, sniffing the scent of the Russia leather binding, and noticing the heavy silver clasps. By pure accident he touched the hidden spring, and the little volume sprang open.

Simeon Krillet looked at it curiously. Writing, writing, but whose writing, and what

about? Bending down to examine it more closely, his eye caught the name "Deborah." He glanced swiftly down the page.

All at once his face whitened to the colour of fine ivory, but he went on with his reading. He shut the book at last and slipped it in his pocket, and put his hand to his forehead with a dazed, helpless motion, moistening his dry lips with his tongue. At last he moved blindly forward to the door, swaying as he walked, reeling and tottering like a drunken man. He paused for a second, his fingers clutching the handle, and gazed round the room, a look of indescribable hate coming over his features, to be followed by a still more sinister expression as he muttered slowly, "The woman tempted me, and I did eat. Why blame the man?"

CHAPTER IX

FACING HER SIN

"DEBORAH, wake up!" Deborah, startled from her first sleep, woke up with a frightened cry, to find her husband bending over her, whilst he flashed the light he carried in her eyes.

She shuddered with absolute terror as she looked up at him, and felt a cold chill strike down her spine and the clutch of fear's hand on her heart. There was something terrible in the pallor of Simeon Krillet's face, and his grey eyes were blazing. He had torn his shirt open at the throat for more air, and Deborah noticed, as though in a dream, the lines of age about his withered neck. She took in every crude detail of his appearance. The lamp he carried was merciless and hid nothing, not even the ferocious way he had bitten at his underlip. One little drop of blood hung red on it, a tiny bead of crimson; the sight of it turned Deborah sick.

She drew the bedclothes over her head with a faint, moaning cry, shrinking and huddling up under them. She knew that something

had happened, and she guessed dimly that her husband had discovered the truth, but which truth—that she had lied to him and deceived him, or that she loved Robert Waring?

“So you hide your face as Eve did. You fear justice.” He plucked the coarse coverlet from her head as he spoke, dragging it away roughly. Something in his touch, the mere sweep of his hand over her face, made the girl forget her fear in a sudden recoil of disgust. She sat up in bed and faced him, her eyes as fierce as his own.

“Don’t touch me,” she cried sharply. “Don’t touch me.”

He put the lamp down on the chest of drawers, then came back and stood motionless by the bed, gazing hard at her. For the moment her beauty was almost wonderful; her fair hair fell loose down her back like a veil of gold, and her eyes glittered like stars; her face had grown so white that it might have been carved in marble. She had clasped her hands tightly together as though in prayer, but she was not praying, she was waiting feverishly for what was to come.

“Deborah, you have lied to me.” His voice broke the silence at last, and as he spoke he gripped her slender wrists with his large hands, never caring that his fingers were bruising them and printing livid marks.

“Have I?” Her voice was cold, almost indifferent; she was beginning to feel that nothing he could do would very much matter

as long as he went about it quickly and put her out of suspense.

"No child will be born to you. Oh, Deborah, Deborah, to mock me with vain promise of a child!" Tears sprang to his eyes as he said the words, and his cry was very bitter. The girl stirred slightly and felt a faint spirit of remorse; then she remembered how he had forced the lie from her, and her heart and her face hardened.

"You were going to whip me—great God! to whip me, just as if I was a Kaffir woman or your ox or dog—and why? Because I wanted to read the book a great man had written, to see something more in my mind's eye than the great lonely plain, the row of Kaffir huts, and this dull farm"—she was speaking passionately, urging her case wildly. "And it wasn't wrong of me, it wasn't wrong," she went on after a second's brief pause, a pause during which he had crushed her wrists tighter. "I wasn't made to live your life and to ask for nothing more; yet I wanted so little, just permission to read a few books and escape eternal monotony; but you denied it; you—you threatened to beat me."

"Good women were content with the life here," he answered sternly. "They had their household tasks, they bore children, and were happy and satisfied."

"They knew no better," she muttered fiercely. "Life to them was a mere round of duty. They

were stolid and patient like the oxen ; but don't tell me they were happy ; why, they didn't even know the meaning of the word."

"They were good women,"—he was speaking very slowly, as though groping for the right words,—“and you, you are a daughter of lies ; one of those whose feet go down to the pit. Yet, dear Lord, how I have loved you ! Your beauty has made me weak, your false, treacherous beauty. You have snared me in the net of your hair—oh, soft hair that I have loved, frail body that I have cherished.” He let go her wrists suddenly and caught up her wealth of hair, knotting it into a rope, then he twisted a strand tightly round her throat. She thought he was going to choke her to death, but her blue eyes smiled fearlessly ; all at once he sickened of his purpose and flung her back on the bed.

"We must be just," he muttered slowly. "After all, the man may have lied too. She may not be utterly guilty—only light and vain, not a sinner in Israel."

Deborah lay back limp on her pillow ; her wrists were sore and her throat hurt her, but she was too wakeful mentally to take much heed of mere physical sensations.

"In this book"—Krillet held up the little diary—"the Englishman has written down that you do not love your husband. Woman, to your shame—is this true?"

Deborah started, and her heart began to leap

and throb. What had Robert written about her? Oh, for an hour of life so that she might read and see! Surely God would not let Simeon Krillet kill her till she had mastered the contents of the little volume, and learnt what her lover thought of her. For the girl had no idea that Waring's interest was merely analytical, and his kindness prompted by chivalry. All at once she became conscious that her husband waited a reply to his question.

"I do not love you," she answered. "I never did. If you choose to remember, Simeon, that was a question no one asked at the time of our marriage. I was told you were to be my husband and that I must obey you. The service was read, and there was a big dance. In the middle of the merriment you told me the wagon was ready, and we started on our journey across the plain. I think I sobbed away my girlhood that night, while you slept heavily and the oxen moved on softly, but when you woke you found me dry-eyed, and dry-eyed I have remained."

"I am good to you, kind, and, dear Lord, how loving! I have kissed no woman as I have kissed you, Deborah."

She flushed a warm crimson, and her eyes grew like fine steel. "Your kisses! your kisses! How many times have I rubbed my lips after you have shamed them? How many times have I crept to the pool at the bottom of the orchard and wondered if the water flowing over me would ever give me back myself? I am

speaking the truth at last—the truth in all its bitterness.”

“You are.” He flung his head back and laughed. There was something frightful in such laughter. The little Kaffir maid crouching outside the door shivered as she heard it, her eyes rolling with terror, but Deborah Krillet lay back calm in her bed.

“This man, this Waring,” Krillet went on after a moment, “has put down in his book that he wants to take you to England. See, I will be just; oh yes, I will be just, and read you the very words in which the sinner confesses this desire.”

“To take me to London.” The girl murmured the words softly to herself in a voice of exquisite happiness. A rose-pink flush stole across her face, and she felt as if she was floating away on a wave of warm rapture out to a boundless sea. Simeon Krillet noticed nothing of this; he was putting on a pair of horn spectacles and fumbling for the right page in the diary. At last he found the extract and read it aloud. After he had read the lines he paused, then began to speak.

“You love this man, shameless woman; you love him? You would follow him to England?” His voice had a tone of judgment. As she answered, so would her fate be, Deborah knew this; so, too, did the little maid crouching outside the door, ready when her mistress had sealed her destiny to run out trembling into the

black night and escape the punishment of the eavesdropper.

Deborah said nothing for a moment. She was wondering what to say. If she spoke the truth—well, she knew that Simeon Krillet would kill her; she felt convinced he would, and life had just become full of wild sweetness, for she had misread, as her husband, that fatal page in the diary, and put a construction on it that the writer had never meant. Yet what would happen if she denied her love? She fancied Simeon Krillet would believe her, but he would never allow her to catch another glimpse of Waring, and he would pour the vials of his rage on the man. Never to see her lover again, she had better die than live on to face such a death in life, such a blank future! Besides, death would come in a good hour. She had just realised to her full satisfaction that the Englishman loved her; let her die with the taste of this happiness in her mouth.

She stretched out her body, then gripped the sheet with nervous fingers, but her voice neither quivered nor trembled as she said firmly—

“I love the Englishman. There, I have told you the truth, Simeon, and now let the Lord judge between you and me.

“As He will, as He will.” The man stood up trembling, and his voice ended in a groan. He raised his hand as though to strike the

woman who had betrayed him, but let it fall to his side. Suddenly he sank on his knees by the bed. "You have slept on my breast," he muttered brokenly, "you have eaten of my food, and been mistress of my goods. I have dressed you in silk and made the path smooth for you, and this is the end, Deborah Krillet—you love the stranger!"

"I was born to love him," she replied slowly, "and it was ordained by Fate that we should meet." She closed her eyes as though weary of more converse, adding in a low tone, "Punish me as you like, Simeon, I've lived my life, and so can find courage to die."

He did not answer; a tongue of fire had suddenly leapt across the room, and now the whole farm shook and trembled under the roar of thunder that followed, heavy, crashing thunder.

"God's voice," said Simeon Krillet; "listen to it and learn of it. Ah, learn that the soul that sinneth shall surely die."

CHAPTER X

WAKED JUSTICE

FOR an hour or more the storm raged, raged with torrential violence and wild fury. Deborah lay calm and motionless. She had opened her eyes to watch the flashing lightning, now amber, now blue; ordinarily she was afraid of lightning and affected by the crackling musketry of the heavens, but to-night she prayed wildly that each flash might end her life.

Simeon Krillet sat by the bed, unmoved by the storm, reckless of the sheep which might be exposed to it, or of the farm buildings liable to be struck, his eyes never moving from his wife's face, his brain pondering on the death that she should die.

Once and once only he broke into speech; that was after a lurid flash of flame had been followed by an awesome crack of thunder and sweeping swirl of rain. He watched Deborah to see her quiver, but the small white face was motionless, no trace of fear on it.

"You are afraid," he asked savagely and brutally, "the next flash may kill?"

"I am past fear," came the answer, and the scarlet lips parted in a strange, almost triumphant, smile, as Deborah Krillet realised her own strength.

When the storm had died down and only a faint grumbling of thunder could be heard, Simeon's terrible silence began to get on the woman's nerves. If he would only take his eyes from her face—but he would not; he sat there gazing, gazing, as if he would search out the hidden depths of her soul.

At last, when a few faint streaks of grey were beginning to line the blackness of the sky, and a refreshing coolness in the air heralded the approach of dawn, he rose slowly and walked to the door, turning as he reached it to speak to his wife.

"Get up and dress," he said shortly. "Put on your wedding-dress, and be careful how you coil up your hair—it will not need to be uncoiled again." Then he went out, shutting the door softly.

Deborah rose obediently from her bed; she went to the oak chest where her wedding clothes had been carefully packed away against the day of her burial, and took them out, feeling a faint thrill of excitement, a curious stirring of the blood. What would Robert Waring do when he returned to find her dead? Surely her death would make her fair in his eyes for ever, and this sacrament of blood would unite their souls indissolubly. For the rest every-

thing seemed vague and unreal as a dream. Later on a sudden sense of terror and despair might come upon her, but just now she only felt curiously alive and excited.

She took a pleasure in her own beauty as she slipped into her clothes, the delicate pleasure a bride takes who is glad for the bridegroom's sake she is fair. Deborah Krillet, offering up her life on the pyre of her passion, was triumphant over her white skin and her hair like spun gold, her finely turned limbs, her slender grace, for they made her sacrifice the greater.

She was dressed at last; she smoothed out the frills of the white muslin wedding-dress, and was annoyed by a crease in the sleeve; then laughed at herself, for how could a creased sleeve affect a woman going to her death? But the laugh ended in a low sob; she was beginning to give way, her iron will gradually breaking under the cruel strain.

Fortunately the dawn was coming in cold and grey, and the country looked sad and solemn; had the sun been shining she would have clung to life and been afraid at thoughts of leaving it, but the sun hid behind clouds and made what was coming more possible.

Then as the time passed and Simeon Krillet delayed his coming, a great and overmastering terror came over the highly-strung nature—a passionate dread of death. She wanted to live, she wanted to be happy.

All Deborah Krillet's womanhood pleaded for a reprieve, and she sobbed out wild prayers to God to send Robert Waring back in time to save her, knowing all the while that he would return too late, return to find her dead and beyond his help or kisses.

She shrieked at last when the door opened and her husband entered—a wild, pitiful shriek, such as a hare gives, trapped.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked, trembling. "You are not going to hurt me, Simeon? Oh, Simeon, you won't hurt me?"

"Have no fear," he replied coldly; "you are beyond the reach of the whip, Deborah, far beyond. I only chastise those I love; as for you, I am going to kill you." He smiled harshly at her face of blind terror, and went on slowly, "It will be an easy death, because I loved you once, and you are tender and young."

"How?" Her white lips framed the trembling question.

"I shall take you to the field where the Krillets sleep, tie you to the tree my father planted, and shoot you dead, false wife, false woman, when I hear the rumble of wagon wheels—when Robert Waring comes in sight. Yes, he shall see and be powerless to help; you shall cry out, but cry in vain."

"Simeon!" She wavered and tottered, flung her arms out wildly, then fell in a limp heap at his feet.

Simeon Krillet picked her up in his long, lean

arms and carried her easily down the wooden stairs. At the foot he halted and gave a groan, bent his head hurriedly, and touched her cold forehead with his lips; it was a kiss of farewell.

Outside the farm he had his cart waiting; he had harnessed the horse himself. They were all asleep in the Kaffir huts, fast asleep; a Kaffir had stirred in his sleep as his master walked softly past the kraal, and had muttered something to his wife, but she had bid him dream again and not whisper foolish fears, so he grunted himself to sleep. A dog howled, a lonely, weird howl that rang through the air, then silence settled on the lonely farm, the deep silence of a world asleep.

Krillet placed Deborah in the cart and climbed in by her side. She was still unconscious, a limp and crushed heap of bridal finery, a butterfly broken on the wheel.

The morning was still grey, and drizzling rain was falling. The horse was disposed to be restive at starting, so the Boer brought his whip down smartly on its haunches, causing the brute to bound forward wildly. The drive to the burial-ground was soon accomplished, but the horse shied badly turning into the field. Krillet rewarded it with a brutal lashing; then he had a brief vision of flashing hoofs which seemed to become entwined with the shafts and harness; he brought the whip down again.

A second later he was lying on the rough grass, Deborah not far from him, while a dying

horse uttered shrieks of pain under the weight of a shattered, overturned cart.

Dazed and shaken, Krillet rose to his feet, and staggered to his wife.

"You are not hurt, Deborah?" he asked anxiously; then he remembered the errand he had come on, and a wild burst of laughter shook his gaunt frame, laughter fearful to hear.

He looked round for his gun. It was not damaged, so he put it down carefully on the grass, and awoke to the knowledge that he had an ugly cut on his face, also that Deborah was slowly moaning herself back to life, and what he had to do he had best do quickly.

Deborah Krillet came to a consciousness of things present, to find herself firmly fastened to a tree, tied to it by a cord as to a stake. She could see the turn of the road along which Waring would drive his wagon, but only the turn of a few yards, so even if she shrieked for aid when she heard the rumble of the wagon wheels, the tragedy of her life would be over before he could come to her help. Simeon Krillet had planned things well.

She glanced at him as he sat a few yards off watching her. He had his little Bible in his hand, and the gun lay at his feet. Appeal to his mercy seemed hopeless, still she was young and life was desperately sweet; even to breathe the air and stir one's limbs was good. She thought of the grave, of corruption, and the worm; shivered, and sent her soul out in one cry—

"Simeon, Simeon—don't kill me!"

"Not yet," he answered sternly; "do not be frightened; not till the wagon comes in sight; if we wait here whole days and nights, he shall see what he has done, see the punishment he has brought on you, and then the matter will have its end."

She looked round helplessly, casting her eye over the little grave-plot. Dear Lord, she did not want to sleep with that solemn gathering of Krillets, their wives and their babes, and to mix her dust with their dust.

"Simeon," she began again, "if you kill me it will be murder—murder!" She shrieked the last word at him. He looked at her steadily and coldly.

"No, Deborah, it will be justice, even the justice of the Book." There was a ring of finality in his voice, and the wretched woman realised the futility of further appeal. Suddenly, and as if to convince her of the truth of his statement, he began to read out loud. He chose every passage that bore the most remote bearing on her sin; he hurled at her the law of Moses, then turned to the Book of Proverbs and read the seventh chapter, sparing no line of it, and letting his voice rise harsh and fierce as he recited the last tremendous lines.

"Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death."

Deborah listened vaguely. Once or twice her red lips had curled scornfully. Was she, indeed,

that sort of woman? Like enough, but she at least had not had her fill of love, and would never have now.

She was getting faint and spent. The hot African sun had begun to stream down, and she noticed in a dizzy fashion that the flies were flocking over the dead horse. The sight was horrible; she shut her eyes and began to wish dreamily that she could drift gently to the unknown country. Death seemed less terrible now she was so tired.

All at once a thrill shot through her whole body, and she opened her eyes wide, straining helplessly against the cord that bound her to the tree, pain and fatigue forgotten; she heard the creak of wagon wheels, the slow creak of wagon wheels.

He was coming, but what would happen as he came?

"Simeon, for God's sake, spare me." Her cry might have softened any man but the one to whom she appealed, and her little piteous face have turned any heart to mercy; but Simeon Krillet saw nothing but red—he was drunk with wrath.

The creaking of wheels grew louder, and the wagon came in sight. Deborah gave one hasty glance at her husband's set face and bloodshot eyes, then closed her own eyes and folded her hands like a little child praying.

CHAPTER XI

THE CHAMBERS OF DEATH

SIMEON KRILLET raised his gun. Deborah heard the breech snap as the cartridge slid into the chamber. She shut her eyes, but she opened them again rapidly. She glanced at the slow-moving wagon, the wagon that would arrive too late ; how lazily the oxen were taking it ; one, the white one, was lowing. Why didn't Robert Waring lash them with his whip and hurry up fiercely to her rescue ? But why should he ? He didn't know.

She glanced at her husband ; he was standing up stiff and rigid, no mercy in his eyes. He was listening to the creak of the wagon wheels, muttering low in his beard. A little tremor passed through the girl's whole frame, a long nervous quiver followed, and then she grew cold and passive. What did death or anything else matter if the sky and field and wall would cease to spin round and round, and she could shut her eyes for ever on such a revolving universe ? She was faint and dizzy with the spin ; it made her senses real.

"Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death."

Simeon Krillet said the words loud and firmly. Then, as he was about to take aim, the snap of a revolver rang out like the sharp bark of a wolf or dog. The Boer started violently, and seemed to jump in the air—he looked hideously like a distorted marionette silhouetted against the fierce blue of the sky, then, dropping his gun, his hand made a spasmodic movement towards his chest. He fell the next second heavily on his back, stone dead.

Robert Waring leapt over the low wall and ran forward to Deborah. Her head was swaying from side to side helplessly, and her eyes were distended beyond their natural size; her mouth was half open. He feared for her reason as well as her life. Had he only arrived to tinge a tragedy with red, a tragedy already consummated?

"Deborah," he muttered hoarsely, "Deborah! Don't be afraid, poor child, you are safe now, quite safe." He busied himself cutting the rope that bound her to the tree, and she fell a limp burden into his arms.

He held her close to him for a moment or two, feeling as if he clasped a dead woman, she lay so still and silent. Realising at last that she had fainted he laid her gently on the short grass, resting her head against the raised hillock of one of the Krillet graves, then stood watchful over her.

Deborah lay motionless, her eyes fixed on

Waring's face ; suddenly she began to gasp as if choking, and to clutch the grass with her fingers ; she was awakening from her stupor, either to life or madness.

The wagon stopped, and the little Kaffir maid leapt lightly from behind its cover and ran swiftly into the burial-field, the field now of blood.

Her sharp black eyes took in the whole scene—the dead man on his back, face upwards, something red and clammy streaking in a thin stream from his chest ; the other man, the Englishman, standing helpless and tongue-tied, gazing at the white-faced girl, the girl whose eyes were full of wild terror, and whose countenance was convulsed with spasms. Farther off again she saw a wrecked cart and a dead horse, and sweeping over the horse a black cloud of flies.

It was a moment for action. Another second and Deborah Krillet would be a shrieking mad-woman. She must be roused from her trance of horror, made to understand she was safe ; blood had been shed, but not her blood.

The Kaffir girl ran swiftly to her mistress, pushing Waring on one side. She pulled roughly at the delicate muslin frock, tearing it wide open at the throat ; then she slapped Deborah's cold palms and shook her by her slender shoulders, trying to rouse her to the understanding of the situation.

"Old Baas is dead—dead—dead," she cried in

the girl's ear. "Do you understand?—dead! He can't hurt Vrow Deborah ever again; he can't have the whip cracked on my back—he's dead." There was a ferocious exultation in the Kaffir's voice, as if she remembered that her flesh still bore the marks of the lash.

A flicker of light seemed to come into Deborah's strained eyes; then she began to shudder violently and to twitch all over her body.

"He isn't dead," she said very slowly, addressing both the Kaffir girl and Waring. "He is only pretending to be asleep whilst he watches the three of us. He will get up in a moment; he is very cunning; and then—ah!" She burst into a wild shriek of laughter—awful laughter to listen to.

"This is worse than hell," muttered Waring between his teeth, feeling utterly helpless. "Don't, dear, don't." He laid his hand on her shoulder, but she went on laughing and shivering.

"Look!" The little Kaffir maid ran to where the dead man lay and stood by the body. "I tell you he is dead—see here!" She spurned the white face with her brown foot. The action was brutal, and aroused in Waring a spirit of revulsion and disgust. Not so, Deborah. She had watched the girl as though fascinated, but when she noticed that Simeon Krillet neither moved nor stirred, but lay as a log, and also that the Kaffir, instead of being cut down, stood

up laughing and mocking, she suddenly realised things as they were.

She sprang to her feet with a wild cry of joy.

"Ah! now I know he is dead," she cried. "And you—you have saved me." She turned to Waring with a wonderful smile—a smile that began in her eyes—and held out her hands eagerly. He took them for a second in his own, then pointed to the grinning Kafir.

"She met me on the road at daybreak," he said slowly, "and warned me of your danger; crouched behind the wall here while he tied you to the tree, then came on to where the wagon waited at the turn of the road, got in, and drove up slowly. I ran on, taking cover behind the wall, till I came within safe range."

Deborah listened, but hardly took in the meaning of the words. The little Kafir maid had gone out to warn Waring, so much she understood, and he had come to save her; also, great fact of all, Simeon Krillet was dead.

All at once she discovered that the sun was shining, and that it was a good thing to be alive. At about the same time it began to occur to Robert Waring that he was in a pretty awkward position. Would the Boers, who were friends of Krillet's, believe the story he and Deborah would tell them of the farmer's death, and hold the Englishman justified? or, as was highly probable, would they take the dead man for witness, and let his blood cry for vengeance, and not in vain?

Something of Robert Waring's uneasy reflections came into his eyes. He looked around him furtively, scenting the air for danger, and his face took on the expression of the hunted man.

The keen-witted Kaffir girl saw this. She was no fool, this brown, apish-looking creature, clad in a torn cotton dress—a dress that hardly covered her—and she grasped the fact that if Deborah Krillet or Robert Waring came under the letter of the law, she also would share their punishment, and she knew the justice the Boers meted to Kaffirs. Yet those two, the mad Englishman and her white-faced mistress, stood like two statues. Dear Lord, the foolishness of the white folk! Didn't they understand the danger of delay, and the necessity for action?

She sidled up to Waring, and looked at him sharply and cunningly, her plan of campaign decided.

"The Baas—was killed," she said in a low voice, making long pauses, "when old Junker"—she pointed to the dead horse—"make big splinter of cart. Vrow Deborah, she knocked silly, and you found her here. Bury the Baas to-night—wiser."

"By Jove!" cried the Englishman, with a sigh of relief, "the girl's right. We must hold our tongues. Dead men tell no tales." He turned to Deborah as he spoke. "We must tell the Kaffirs up at the farm that he was killed owing to his fall from the cart. Thank God for

that lucky accident. Bury him at nightfall, and who will be the wiser? I'll make the coffin myself, and put him in, so who's to know the truth?"

He was talking rapidly, sweat pouring down his forehead, feeling all the time that a grim tragedy was being treated in curt, commonplace fashion. And how grimly real it all was! The brown graveyard, the hard blue sky, burning African sun, and the dead man—the man whom he had shot down with his own hand.

"Yes, that will be best," said Deborah firmly. Her self-control was coming back now she knew that Simeon Krillet was actually dead. She put up one hand to her forehead, smoothing back loose waves of hair, the while the trembling fingers of the other busied themselves with her disarranged bodice. Waring, looking at this, knew that the crisis for her had passed.

"The Kaffirs will ask no questions," she went on eagerly, "they will only be glad. He was a devil to them, a devil; and as to the Boers, our neighbours, they will expect no funeral—it's too hot! They will come over to see the grave, but they won't look inside it." She laughed fiercely. Her face was still pale, but set hard and firm; all the blood in it seemed concentrated in her scarlet lips.

"We had better lift him into the wagon," muttered Waring. It was curious how both the Englishman and Deborah seemed to avoid calling the dead man by his name. He beckoned

to the Kaffir girl as he spoke. Deborah sank down on one of the little graves, and plaited a ring of grass whilst the two bent to their task. It was heavy work carrying the limp body across the field to where the ox-wagon stood in the road, but it was done at last.

Waring covered the body with some canvas, and then went back to fetch Deborah. She walked firmly. All at once it occurred to him that she had not shed a tear; it seemed marvellous; all the women he had known cried so easily, certainly Joan did.

The wagon started. Waring found it horribly difficult to drive. He had got rid of the Kaffir boys on some pretext when the Kaffir girl had dashed in upon him with her wild story of Deborah's danger. Now he found how far from easy it is to drive a team.

They got along slowly, very slowly. At last they approached a field close to the farm. Two Kaffirs were digging a big hole in the rough ground; Deborah noticed this.

"Do you see that?" she whispered to Waring, and her voice had a strange note in it. "He must have set them to that task—they are digging my grave. I was not to sleep in the burial-ground. No, no; a dog's death for me, and a dog's grave."

Waring looked and shuddered. To the end of his life he never forgot the picture. Yes, the hole the two Kaffirs were digging was deep and wide enough for a grave, a grave to bury

Deborah in. Brown men digging up brown earth, and blazing sunshine streaming down. He had come out to South Africa in search of sensation, and had run full tilt into a drama of human passion, and this was the most terrible picture of all, the most vivid scene.

He turned to Deborah. Was it possible that she was smiling? How mocking sweet her lips looked, how slight she was and girlish—and that dark hole——

“Thank God,” he said earnestly, “that I arrived in time! Oh, Deborah, thank God!”

“Or the devil,” she answered calmly; “for I am one of those whose footsteps go down to hell. He said so, the dead man sleeping.”

CHAPTER XII

THE SHULAMITE UNVEILS

ROBERT WARING looked down on the rough coffin he had made, and gave a slight involuntary shudder. It is one thing to shoot a man, another to make his coffin. He thought of Joan Desborough, and what she would say if she saw him at the task. Would she shriek daintily and cover her eyes with her hands? She had screamed once, he remembered, when they came across a dead robin on a bed of snow, for she hated and was afraid of death. Pretty feminine Joan, he loved her all the better for her shrinking tremors; they became her as her soft frocks and lace scarves did; he was glad, very glad, she could not see him now. His thoughts wandered to Deborah Krillet. What was she doing, he wondered, at the present moment; praising God that her life had been preserved, or shuddering over the moments of agony she must have passed through, and living them over again in the room above?

How calm and collected she had been when she told the Kaffirs what had happened, and

how Simeon Krillet had met his end. She had directed some of the chattering crew to go and bury the dead horse, and bring back the wrecked cart. She had seen that no one removed the canvas that shrouded the dead man, and had even helped Waring and the Kaffir girl to carry him to his room; then she had stepped inside and closed the door.

It was horrible to think of her alone in that room, horrible—she preparing the dead man for the grave, whilst Waring made his coffin; she must have nerves of iron and be built in a strange mould. Robert Waring found himself wondering after a while if Jael had been a slight, slim girl, or if Clytemnestra had had soft, fair hair?

And how had it all come about? The Kaffir girl had given him a coarse version from which he shrank; she must have been mistaken. Simeon Krillet could not be punishing Deborah on his account. Why, he had never spoken a word of love to the girl; the idea was absurd. Besides, he was the lover of Joan, and had no passion left for another woman. No; Simeon must have discovered that Deborah had cheated him over the child supposed to be coming, and a furious scene had probably passed between husband and wife.

How hot it was in the fuel house! He put his hand to his damp brow. And what a strange flickering shadow the lamp cast! He could make out the weird reflection of an old

woman's face; she wore a curious cap, and nodded her head. Of course it was only a shadow; still, Krillet's mother might have looked like her, and the whole effect was uncanny.

A dog was howling. Most likely some Kaffir had been beating or kicking it; still the howling was dismal to listen to. Who said that dogs had the power of seeing spirits, and that they watched dead men leave their homes? A foolish superstition, of course, but he wished he hadn't chanced to remember it.

The door of the fuel house opened softly, and Deborah entered. She looked very wan and small, but no trace of tears marred her face, and her mouth was set hard. She had changed her torn muslin dress for one of some soft grey stuff, and had brushed out and smoothed her hair.

She stood perfectly silent, looking first at Waring, then at the rude coffin. Her breast rose and fell a little, and she stirred the pile of white shavings with her foot.

"I have finished," muttered Waring at last. He hardly dared to look at her, and yet felt compelled to; she attracted him like a magnet, though there had never been a moment when she failed so utterly in physical beauty.

"And so have I." She spoke quite calmly, yet each of her words fell cold and incisive on the Englishman's ears. He knew to what task she referred, and her calm struck him as terrible.

"Don't you feel the horror of it all?" he asked almost irritably. "Your part has been more ghastly than mine."

"Has it?" she replied slowly, almost indifferently, coming more forward, and touching the coffin with her hand. "I shall be glad when everything is done. I ordered the wagon to be round by ten o'clock; it is nearly eight now. I wish it were ten."

"So do I. And the grave—has that been dug?" He spoke almost in a whisper.

"Yes. Just underneath the tree he tied me to." She smiled very faintly. "That is my idea of justice."

"Deborah,"—he took her hands in his, and looked at her earnestly,—“I would rather you wept than you smiled; for he loved you in his way, brute though he was. Your husband loved you, and I believe that was why he would have killed you. I ought to have left things as I found them when I came here. I encouraged you to revolt against his absurd prejudices, and the outcome of it all is this.” He touched the coffin lightly. Deborah looked at him with clear, searching eyes—eyes in which he thought there was even a little scorn.

"Do not blame yourself," she said quietly. "Some things have to be; they are ordained from the beginning. It was not possible—it could not have been possible—for me to spend my life with Simeon Krillet. Had you not come I must have stolen out to the black

pond one evening and drowned myself. I often thought of doing so, only the water was so dark and muddy, and Simeon always spoke of getting the pond cleaned. I waited for that." She spoke so calmly and looked such a child. "I believe," she went on slowly, "that you were sent here that all should happen as it has. He was hard, and cruel, and old; it was not fair he should live and I should die; also—you are not a woman, so will not understand—but his kindness was worse than his whip." She trembled a little and the firm mouth quivered.

"My dear,"—Robert Waring forgot the English girl Joan, forgot everything in the world except the woman facing him, this child-woman with her fierce virtue that refused love except to love,— "don't think of the past; forget it all, forget it." His voice shook as he spoke; she was such a revelation of woman.

"Can I"—she looked at him steadily—"forget that he bought me like a chattel and treated me like a toy, loved me because I pleased his eye? There are some sins against herself a woman never forgets, and the love of such a man as Simeon Krillet is one. Days of shame and nights of hell. Do you realise that he plucked my youth from me with coarse fingers? Oh, God, how I have suffered! and because I was his wife I had to smile and seem content. I have been through all this, endured it silently, and yet you wonder that

I have the nerve to dress the man for his grave. If only you knew how he has crushed my soul! You were sorry for my bruised flesh, and I thought then how little a man understands a woman." She stopped speaking and brushed away the first tear he had seen her shed.

"I do understand." His voice was very gentle, but he was studying her curiously, this delicate side of her temperament appealing to him strongly, and her fine shrinking from Krillet pleasing him. "But it is all over now, and you are very young."

"I feel old." She came closer to Waring. He felt her warm breath on his cheek, and he noticed the beat of the pulse in her throat. "Perhaps it would have been better if he had shot me this morning," she added softly. "Think, I should have been behind life now instead of inside. I should have known the reason of everything—no more puzzling and straining to understand things, and no more pain. I'm rather tired of being moved along by some force I don't comprehend, and made to do certain things by an unknown power. You and I, for instance—three months ago we were strangers, and yet to-night—" she looked up at him with a queer light in her eyes—"to-night we shall stand by Simeon Krillet's open grave, and hide a secret there. Who pushed us into this position? Who has been playing with our lives? Can you tell me that?" She shivered violently.

He shook his head. All at once she caught his arm with quick nervous fingers. "Let me touch you, touch something warm and alive," she whispered in low tones. "Suppose he was to wake up—come here and find us?" She looked around her with distended eyes—large, frightened eyes.

"Dead men don't wake," he answered soothingly, slipping his arm round her trembling form, quieting her as he would a child.

"But they haunt," she answered fearfully, "and one can feel their presence—a terrible thing, the presence of the dead."

CHAPTER XIII

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

It was very dark in the burial-field a few hours later. The moon had gone in behind a cloud, and everything seemed wrapped in gloom and shadow. Also, it was very cold, the cold fierceness of the African night.

The Kaffir boys who had dug Simeon Krillet's grave, and had helped to carry his rough coffin from the wagon, had stolen back to the wagon under cover of the dark, and were shivering and crouching beside it. They were horribly frightened; for all they knew the Baas's ghost might walk. It is ill work to make graves for white men. Let the vrow and the Englishman stand there if they would; he, the Englishman, was still filling in the grave, so perhaps he was not afraid of the dead Baas. The vrow, now, how white and cold she looked! Would she be a harsh task-mistress, and who would she marry? Perhaps the Englishman overseer. Ja! that would be good; he was a fool, and spared the whip.

So they chattered and whispered, those half-

developed offsprings of Nature, with the frame of man and the instinct of beast.

"Can't you finish putting the earth down?" Deborah spoke impatiently, for the midnight burial had tried her almost beyond her strength. "He will sleep sound enough till the Judgment Day, and it's hateful to hear the earth being pressed down. I feel as if it was on my face too." She pulled a fleecy white shawl round her head as she spoke; her eyes were glittering like stars.

Waring ceased to shovel down the soil. He had gone on with the task mechanically, feeling a curious sense of self-preservation in the action. The better Simeon Krillet was hidden from the eyes of men, the less danger he would run. Let him hide that ugly wound on the dead Boer's chest under a weight of brown earth—better for himself, for Deborah, for Joan.

Dear, pretty Joan! Strange to think of her at such a moment, but he wondered passionately what she was doing. It would be getting on for eight o'clock in England, and close on winter. She most likely would be coiled up in a huge arm-chair in front of a glowing fire, glancing lazily at some magazine or ladies' paper—Joan abhorred serious literature—or stay, wouldn't she be dressing for dinner? putting on one of those dainty lace frocks she liked, fastening a bracelet perhaps, a trinket he had given her. Whilst he—good God!—was filling up a grave! The contrast between his occupation and hers was ghastly.

The cloud passed on and the moon appeared. There was light enough now to enable him to see Deborah, and one glance banished Joan from his thoughts. He had never imagined that a woman could look so terrible or so beautiful, and this man, ever athirst for sensation, drew a deep breath as he saw what the moon showed him. A woman, nay, a girl, absolutely passion-pale, the small face of her gleaming like white ivory, her eyes glowing lamps of fire. Her lips—Medea might have had her smile; it was an inheritance of the fierce past, the past when women loved and hated as they now like or dislike.

Who had called up this look to her face, this marvellous blending of hate and love? It was magnificent and terrific. Was she looking at a dead man and a living man, seeing them both in her mind's eye, dividing her soul between them, with its portion of love and hate?

Waring looked round over his shoulder, as if he half expected to see the lover this woman was gazing at standing behind him. He felt as he had felt in a lesser degree when witnessing Sarah play tragedy; the actress had thrilled him by pure triumph of art, and Deborah by frank revelation of nature; but he watched both from the stalls and with the same zest.

The moon went in again, the curtain fell. Something in Waring's throat seemed to choke him; then he realised that he also was an actor

in this drama, and had his part to play. He smoothed the earth level on the grave, then turned to where Deborah stood. She was only a black shadow now; the limelight had ceased to play on her.

"Are you ready to go?" he said in a hushed voice. "I think we can go now."

"Quite." Her voice was very calm and cold, and it rang out clear through the night. She made a little movement of departure. Waring marvelled anew at the strange complexity of temperament that makes a woman the kindest and cruellest creature God ever fashioned.

Yet he admired the fierce hate that made Deborah so callous; it was so vividly barbaric. He had only known women who made storms in teacups, pretty kittenish creatures like Joan. This was woman as she was. What a study for an artist of moods! Still, he lingered and had to linger by the grave. A weakness of the West, some of the soft sentimentality of the age he was born in, was upon him, and the man who had never troubled to enter a church for years felt he could not leave the grave without muttering a prayer over it.

He knew he was inconsistent; still he had to be. Something spoke in him—a voice that had to be obeyed.

"Hadn't we better say a prayer?" he asked Deborah haltingly. "This is the sort of burial one gives a dog."

He could not see her face, but he felt her smile

as she answered softly ; but oh, the cruelty in her tone !—

“Pray for him if you like ; but I—I would not lift my little finger to save him from the worm and the pit.”

Waring shuddered. What had Simeon Krillet done to the child he had married to turn her into this terrible woman—this woman who could not forgive ? Yet he envied her strength as he murmured, brokenly, the few words from the Burial Service that he remembered.

“I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord.” He paused, forgetting the next lines, then went on hurriedly, leaving out words here and there. “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth ; and though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh I shall see God.” A brief vision came upon him as he spoke, and he seemed to see old Krillet, Deborah, and himself standing up before the great white throne. It was years since he had believed in the resurrection of the dead ; now all at once he seemed to have reverted to the old unquestioning belief of childhood. There was nothing risible in white-robed saints, harping angels, or graves yielding up their dead ; it all seemed the real thing, the thing bound to happen ultimately.

He heard a low sob. Deborah’s firmness had broken ; she was clinging to him, a swaying delicate figure, and he heard her whisper, half to herself and half to him—

"I don't mind if God forgives him. He acted after his lights—and I'm sorry I lied about the child. Well he has them all with him now, dead wife, dead children. Oh, let us go—quickly, or I shall have to scream. Do you understand? I cannot bear any more."

Her fingers tightened on Waring's arm. He turned quickly and walked to the wagon with her. She stumbled a little and seemed faint, so he put his arm round her in support.

"It is finished—all finished," he whispered just before they reached the wagon; "be brave, it is finished."

"Yes," she muttered, her clear voice hoarse with strong emotion, "that awful life is over, and our life begins—our life."

What did she mean, or had her words any meaning? Waring asked himself this as the wagon rumbled back, back to the lonely farm. He awoke the next day asking the same question.

CHAPTER XIV

TANT ANNIE ASKS A QUESTION

ABOUT a fortnight after Simeon Krillet's burial Deborah sat in the stiff parlour dispensing strong coffee to three heavy-faced Boer women, one a sister of the dead man, the other two her own sisters-in-law. Their male relatives had gone out with Waring to inspect the mound of earth that hid Krillet from sight.

The three women were dressed in deep mourning, and made a liberal display of crape and white handkerchiefs. They afforded a striking contrast to Deborah, for they were as huge and unwieldy as she was slight and lithesome.

They looked at the girl curiously and furtively, taking in every detail of her appearance; there was something in her manner they could not understand—a hint of restrained excitement held well in check, a vitality and force of life lacking in the Deborah they had known, a peculiar expression in the mocking eyes.

Well, well, Deborah was a rich woman; had not that husband of hers left her all he

possessed? It was no wonder she looked and spoke with new-found assurance and self-reliance, ja, no wonder at all.

Tant Trante held out her cup for more coffee. She was a huge woman, and felt the heat sadly. She kept on mopping her moist forehead with a large black-edged handkerchief. Just now she was good-humoured and far too affectionate to please Deborah, for the girl remembered her coarse taunts and cruel blows, and the life she had led her at her brother's farm. This was the woman who had forced her to marry Krillet.

"It is a sad thing to lose a husband," she remarked, shaking her head, whilst Deborah crossed over to the white stove. "Do I not know; I, who have buried two?" She sighed heavily, and wiped her small grey eyes.

"It is the Lord's will; all flesh is grass." Simeon Krillet's sister felt bound to carry on the conversation and to administer consolation to the widow. "And the men will be here fast enough when the mourning is over. Ja! they know where sheep and money are to be found. Deborah will have them here as thick as flies; I know. Was I not with Tant Wiljemena, she who married little Piet Cronjer, and he not three months in his grave before she was 'sitting up' with Oom Vander Beer? It's human nature; God never meant men and women to live alone." She fanned herself with a sheet of writing-paper, watching Deborah

closely. What sort of reply would the girl make to these hints?

Deborah flushed a warm pink all over her white face, and straightened her slim back. The conversation was intolerable, and yet these women were of her blood and she was one of them. She prayed that Waring might not return to the farm before it was time for her guests to go; if they talked in this strain before him she felt she would die of shame.

"If you had had children, now," hazarded the third woman, "that would have been a comfort. Ach! the dear Lord has tried you very hard; but we all have our trials;" she addressed the group with a comprehensive sigh. "There is Deborah here, who has lost her husband. And he was a good husband, always ready to give her all she wanted. But what about my trials? Are not half our sheep eaten up with the scab? And Tant Trante, did she not lose her only little baby? One can always get another husband, but a dead child is a dead child——"

"And Almighty God has visited me heavily," interrupted Tant Annie Krillet, unwilling to be outdone. "Didn't my first husband die after a few months? And isn't my second a mere foolish boy, for all he is a Krillet born and has eight thousand sheep? And wasn't he fair silly to marry his cousin Selina? Only she's not got a single ticky, so God stopped that madness. Ja, we have our trials, yes, every one."

"Had he time to say a prayer before the Lord called him?" inquired Tant Trante curiously, harping back to the tragedy. "Did he make a good end?"

"Oh, he was quoting from the Book before he died—just before," answered Deborah, with a slight smile—a smile that made one of the women shiver. "The end was sudden, you know, very sudden."

"Pray the dear Lord that I die in my bed," muttered the eldest and fattest woman, "and not be pitched from a cart and hurled suddenly into eternity. I feel cold down my spine when I think of it. Give me time to say a chapter and a few psalms, and to tell Piet to lock my wardrobe door, and keep the key safe, so that they don't touch and stare at my clothes when they come to lay me out." She leaned back heavily in her rocking-chair.

"There's Louis van Ort," began Tant Annie after a second's pause, "he who lost his wife last winter; two farms and fourteen thousand sheep." She catalogued the items on her fat fingers, watching Deborah keenly, feverishly anxious to discover her brother's successor, the man who would reap his fields, dwell in his house, spend his gold.

"I shall marry no Boer of the lot." Deborah could contain herself no longer. She faced the three astonished women, her neck a little thrown back, her eyes flashing scornfully. "Do I want to become a hewer of wood and drawer

of water, to be treated first as a toy and then as a servant?"

"Hear her." Tant Annie addressed the other women with a melodramatic wave of the arm. "Our men are not good enough. Is it the cursed Englishman who has put his spell over you? Answer me, Deborah—you would not marry the devil's spawn, an Englishman?"

The three heavy women leaned forward, and the glare of six curious eyes were bent on Deborah Krillet. She noticed with a sense of revulsion and disgust the family likeness they all bore each other, their unwieldy bodies and their creased fat faces, faces wholly animal, unredeemed by any flash of soul; yet they were her people, she was of their race.

"Answer me," shouted Tant Annie furiously, crimsoning with passion. "Do you marry this Englishman or not?"

CHAPTER XV

THE BRAVE MAN WITH A SWORD

WOULD Deborah Krillet marry the Englishman overseer? The women scanned the girl's face narrowly, suspiciously. Not one of them cared for her or understood her, but surely she was not mad enough to marry one of the hated race, a cursed Uitlander. That would be going too far.

Deborah looked at her judges, her small face very white and set, her little neck reared proudly. She hated these kinswomen, and why should she bare her heart to them? The perfume of the rose—Love's rose—is too precious to be wasted.

"Marry," she answered slowly, "why should I marry?"

The three women grinned. This was indeed foolishness. "The dear Lord meant men and women to marry," observed Tant Trante. "He put us into the world to keep on refilling it for Him. You cannot go against the Lord, Deborah, and you know it. Not marry? Why, you would be laughed at even by the Kaffir women."

She got up as she spoke, and waddled to the white china stove, intent on more coffee. Annie Krillet frowned a little, and looked hard at her sister-in-law ; she read more in her face than the other women, and she hated to think of the Englishman marrying her brother's widow.

It seemed a wearisome age to Deborah before the unwelcome visitants departed. Things had been worse even when Robert Waring had returned with the men, for the whole party had sat solemnly on the verandah, the men smoking and the women at their coffee-drinking again, and the sole topic of conversation had been the death and virtues of Simeon Krillet.

Deborah had had to tell the whole story, the drive at dawn to the burial-ground, the accident, and how she lay stunned by the side of her dead husband till found by Waring. She had told her lie bravely, played her part well ; but the nervous strain had been excessive, and once or twice Waring thought she would have fainted.

He watched her closely, admiring her cool courage, sorry he could not help her except by his silence.

"What took you to the burial-ground at dawn?" asked Deborah's brother. He was a youngish man, and had married his stout elderly wife for money. He looked at his sister wonderingly as he spoke. The rest of the party listened to what answer the girl would make, but, as it happened, Deborah made none. She had gradually been getting limper and paler, and now she fell back

in her chair so easily and quietly that no one realised for a second that she had fainted. When they did, the Boer women were loudly sympathetic. They called for burnt feathers and vinegar, and for a time Deborah was almost hidden from view and lost under the swirl and flutter of feminine petticoats surrounding her.

After she had recovered consciousness she was persuaded to go up to her room to lie down and rest, and a little later the buggy and mule-cart which had brought the unwelcome visitants were ordered, and they prepared to depart.

The Boers chattered loudly at one end of the verandah as they waited the arrival of the cart and buggy, taking no pains to conceal their aversion to the Englishman. Before Deborah fainted they had drawn their chairs as far from him as possible, and had hardly thrown him a word; now they made no pretence of civility.

"It was foolish of the dead man to have hired an Englishman," they muttered in Low Dutch, caring little if Waring understood or not. "But then, no doubt, his wage was small; still, it is bad judgment to spend money on poor goods. Simeon was always too fond of doing that. Witness the horse which had caused his death. Had he not been sold cheap because he was a dangerous, ill-mannered brute? And now see what has come of it."

Talking and gesticulating, they took their departure, the shrill voices of the women mixing with the gruff tones of the men. Waring

watched them disappear into the distance, hidden from sight by a cloud of yellow dust, and he prayed that he might never see them again. He had little heart for another pilgrimage to the burial-ground. He had sickened with every step he took, constantly seeing the scene again: Deborah tied to the tree, a shrinking piece of whiteness, and the old man, as he stood levelling his gun, fierce determination to slay written on his face, and agonised remorse in his eyes. That was a pretty picture to have printed on a man's brain, and the picture that followed was worse: a dead face turned up to God's sky, glassy dead eyes, eyes that refused to shut, and the voice of a man's blood crying from the ground.

Yet he had been right when he fired that shot. Quite right. It was a question of Deborah's life or Krillet's, the would-be murderer or his intended victim. Still, and this was the thought that troubled him, in some mysterious way he, Waring, seemed responsible for the whole affair, as if it had all been brought about by his agency. He felt that he had aroused, or rather quickened, into life the fatal spirit of revolt that had stirred Deborah against her husband.

He remembered the passionate way the old Boer had read the song to the Shulamite—the song the wise king had written—and how he had applied the words to Deborah. Had Simeon been moved against the wife he adored because her will was not to her husband? And had he intended to cast her into darkness, even as

a king of Persia banished a queen called Vashti?

Love can be as cruel as hate, and men kill what they love. He remembered the lines of a certain wild poem, and quoted softly under his breath, "And each man kills the thing he loves"; then paused a second, for he had forgotten the line that followed, but he remembered the last two lines, and said them aloud—

"The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword."

"What are you saying?" asked Deborah. She had come down from her room, and now stood behind him on the verandah. She looked very wan and small, hardly so much the Shulamite as her ghost.

"I? oh, only quoting a poem I used to be rather fond of," he answered, not looking at her, but leaning heavily on the rail of the verandah. He was strangely conscious of her presence, though, and irritated by the knowledge that she could move him so. What uncanny power did this slight pale girl possess, that his heart beat when he heard her footsteps—the heart that belonged utterly to Joan Desborough?

"Tell it me, please." She seated herself on one of the steps, and clasped her arms around her knees. The glittering sun made her hair a glory of red mane; her small face looked strangely set and resolute, and how firm and

determined the beautiful little chin! Against his will the man kept his eyes upon her. She was such a curious study, that was how he explained the fascination she had for him; a delicate white moth who fluttered about at twilight, a moth who should have been born a butterfly.

To please the girl he recited as many of the verses as he could remember. When he had finished he smiled oddly to himself. How strange it was to be reciting such a poem, bitter fruit of a rotten age, to a woman who recalled the Shulamite of old! He wondered if she half understood it, or would the wild fierceness of her blood meet the fierce hunger of the verses?

Apparently they pleased her, for a faint, curious smile played on her scarlet lips; she twisted a piece of ribbon tightly round her finger, murmuring as she did so, half to herself and half to Waring—

“The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword.”

“I wonder,” she added slowly, “if that was how Simeon felt. It might have been, you know. Those verses help me to understand him. So, according to the poem, he would have been a brave man?”

“A brave man?” cried Waring, hotly and furiously. “To tie a woman to a tree and then to shoot at her in cold blood! It was nothing short of deliberate murder, and a

cowardly murder at that. Only a rank coward could have been guilty of such a deed."

Deborah threw her head back and looked at the Englishman between half-shut eyes. Her whole pose and attitude were alluring; not that she intended this; she was simply herself. Waring noticed how soft and creamy her throat was, and how delicate the lines of her bust. He had no wish to admire, but he did; yet there was no disloyalty to Joan in simple admiration of a beautiful woman. She was no more to him than a glittering star, a piece of ribbon grass, or a fresh red rose; hardly so much as the latter, perhaps, for he was very fond of roses.

So the man argued while the woman watched him. When she spoke at last she did so with a curious prescience of her own future destiny.

"I am not sure if you are right. It needs a brave man to kill—what he cares for. It is easier far to slay with a kiss."

Waring hardly heard her, or took in her words; he was gazing at her intently, marvelling how red her mouth was.

CHAPTER XVI

WRITTEN IN THE BOOK

It was decided by Waring that he must stay on at the lonely farm till the term he had been hired for had expired, and the harvest was gathered in. He could not leave Deborah alone with the Kaffirs. After a few weeks had passed she would feel equal to hiring another overseer, and be more herself again; but just now it would be impossible to leave her.

Besides, suppose by an extraordinary chain of circumstances the truth came out; if any of the dead man's relatives chose to dig up the body, for instance, to discover for themselves what had caused his death; how could Deborah face the position alone? She might even be accused of the murder.

No; Robert Waring's course was plain—he must remain at the farm a little longer, even a matter of a few more days or weeks.

The man hungered for England. His eyes got weary of the barren plain, sick of the harvest fields, yellow and brown, brown and yellow. Oh, for a stretch of soft green meadowland, the

melting blue of an English sky, the delicious rustle of green leaves! Here the sky was like a coarse blue curtain, and there were no majestic trees or waving pines and firs. Round the farm a few eucalyptus trees, certainly, and apricots in the orchard. But what was that to one who yearned for the cool, solemn grandeur of a forest, and the wild bewitching archness of a wood?

Waring was fond of nature; trees and hills were alive to him. Mountains always seemed brooding Titans, and he gave every living shrub an individuality in his mind. Primroses were modest village girls; flaunting peonies, stout city madams; heavy perfumed exotics, fine court ladies, dressed in rich clothes, scented, beautiful.

To such a man the loneliness of a plain became fine torture after the newness of the first impression had worn off. Later on, when he had put it behind him and got well away, staying in some noisy, overcrowded city, listening to the roar of a working, teeming world, he would think of the brooding silence of the plain regretfully: the deep still of the great tract of land, where life itself treads silently, and death sets up no monument. He would wish himself back a thousand times, for such was the man—he was made so.

He was also feverishly anxious to see Joan. Deborah Krillet was beginning to get on his nerves. She was made of stronger, sterner stuff than he was, and she took his breath away. She became too great a strain on his thoughts.

He belonged to the twentieth century of the world's history, as written by man, and the woman to the first, and he found it difficult to live back to her simple directness of speech, thought, and action. He was eternally puzzling his head over her; trying to understand and grasp the motive of her actions, the real thought underlying them; her primitive reality, incomprehensible to his modern complexity.

Simeon Krillet had restored the little diary to its place in Waring's valise, and the leaves got covered with writing in the days that followed—hastily jotted down impressions, each one tinged with the intense egotism of the writer, yet a vivid description of the life on the plain. Deborah's name was on every page; she seemed to permeate the book, yet Waring always wrote of her aggressively.

"Such a contrast to Joan," so he scribbled a few days after the visit of her Boer relatives. "A woman to admire, possibly, but never to love. She is utterly without pity, does not understand the meaning of the word, and yet she could be tireless in the search after pleasure; almost as gay a butterfly as Joan. You can tell this by the way she listens when I talk to her of theatres and dances and all our social peep shows. Her eyes sparkle, and her lips part; she taps her foot as though ready to dance—a small foot, by the way, ankle well turned—and yet the same woman dressed her husband for the grave, and rejoiced over the task. My God! to see Joan

once more ; to take her on my knee and kiss her soft curls. I will never blame her for crying over a dead bird again ! I have seen too much of the devil in a woman lately, and it has made me ready to appreciate Joan's soft tenderness and her pretty, silly, dainty ways. Deborah was magnificent when she received those fat Boer women and their gruff husbands ; her acting would have done credit to Duse ; but I should not like my wife to be able to lie so well. It is a useful but a doubtful accomplishment."

So Waring wrote, and then went down to the parlour to sit and study the woman he had just been criticising.

He disliked being alone. He had a curious and uncomfortable feeling that the dead man came and stood behind his chair, sometimes close at his elbow. "A mere matter of nerves," so he used to say reassuringly to himself ; still a shadow created by nerves was equally to be feared with a wanderer from the realm of silence.

He wondered if Deborah suffered from the same delusion ; he rather fancied that she did. He had noticed once or twice that she looked furtively behind her shoulder. And what was strange about it ? Well she might ! "All houses wherein men have lived and died are haunted houses," so Longfellow has written ; and perhaps he has written the truth.

He also had a hazy, doubtful impression that she somehow expected—he was not sure what she expected, and he did not want to know.

She looked strangely at him sometimes, and spoke as if she fancied that he intended to spend the rest of his life on the lonely, God-forsaken farm. He shuddered at the bare idea. Yet he did not like to feel he should have to leave Deborah there alone; he was more than half inclined to advise her to sell the farm, shake the dust of the Orange Free State from her shoes, and travel. How she would enjoy the great picture-book, turning page after page, journeying from port to port. Then, later on, she would marry—marry some king of the earth, perhaps, a man with a store of gold, a clever man, a great man—for was she not the beautiful Shulamite, worthy by breast and brow to be queen?

When Waring entered the parlour he found Deborah sitting in one of the large horsehair arm-chairs, a huge volume on her knees. He saw at a glance that it was the family Bible, the Bible in which all the family records of birth, marriage, and death had been written since the first Krillet trekked north from Capetown.

The man rather wondered why she was studying the long roll of names so attentively; she bore no love to the Krillets, he fancied, to those alive or to those who slept.

It was dark outside, at least as dark as an African night ever is at harvest-time, so an evil-smelling lamp was on the small round table. How hideous the room was, with its Brussels carpets, red stuff curtains, and clumsy horsehair furniture! A portrait of the little Dutch Queen

hung on the wall; two crude green vases stood on the mantelpiece. Waring thought of Joan's boudoir, full of cushions and flowers, dainty pieces of china and soft Eastern hangings. How she would have screamed, wept, and shuddered over a room like this! And yet it was one in which another woman would have to pass her life! It seemed wrong, somehow.

He sat down in the companion elbow-chair, and shaded his eyes from the lamp, gazing at Deborah through his fingers. She was beautiful; no doubt of that. How strange it was to wonder what her fate would be. Surely God never meant such beauty to be wasted on a lonely African farm; if He did it was a pity!

Deborah got up softly; she always moved gently; like swaying grass, Waring used to think, and his simile was correct. She crossed over to the cupboard, and took out a large wooden pipe with a huge bowl to it; also some Transvaal twist. She handed it to Waring with a smile, then sat down again.

The man looked at her wonderingly. How could she do this thing now? How could she? Did she really expect him to use the dead man's pipe and to smoke his tobacco? Waring forgot that primitive man had no scruples on such points, and that Deborah Krillet was no modern sentimentalist.

"What are you studying that Bible for?" he asked, after a long pause, feeling he must say something; the silence was so oppressive.

Deborah raised her eyes, and, as once before, he thought them mocking.

"I am looking down the list of names," she answered slowly, "studying the dates of the various births and deaths. It appears I am the only childless wife, and Simeon Krillet the one man who did not die in his bed. It is quite interesting reading; each name seems to summon up a ghost. Till you came in, this room seemed full of company—they sat in their grave-clothes, and pointed at me with long fingers." She laughed, but her laugh rang hollow.

"Ah! you feel it too?" he asked in a low voice. "Even as I do in the presence of the dead? Are you not afraid to sit alone?" He looked round the room nervously as he spoke. This company she had spoken of—had they really vanished into space, or would they return presently, and another with them?

"Why should I be afraid?" she replied quietly. "It is only the living one has cause to fear, not the dead folk. They are quite harmless. However much they hate, they cannot hurt. Oh no, I am not afraid!"

Robert Waring got up and moved to where she was sitting. Bending over her shoulder he looked at the page covered so thickly with writing, the last entry being in Simeon Krillet's handwriting, an entry of his marriage.

"You will have to put in the date of his death, won't you?" the Englishman whispered. "It has to be done, I suppose?"

"Yes," she answered, in her clear, cool voice. "That's why I got out the Bible. Will you fetch me a pen, please, and the ink?"

Waring obeyed; then watched her whilst she wrote down the dead man's name and the date of his death. Her face hardened a little, and the rich scarlet of her mouth seemed to pale, but her fingers neither shook nor trembled, and her self-control struck him as marvellous.

When she had written down the date she paused, then looked up at Waring, pen in hand, an inscrutable expression in her eyes.

"Simeon Krillet did not die in his bed," she said slowly; then waited to hear what the man would answer.

"I suppose you will have to write he was thrown out of the cart and killed," Waring said nervously. "That seems the only thing to do, as far as I can see."

Deborah looked hard at him, and bit the end of her pen with sharp, white teeth. "I will not write down a lie in the Book," she replied firmly. "No, that is just the one thing that I will not do!"

Then, after a long pause, she took up the pen and wrote another line, a peculiar look coming over her face.

Waring glanced down to see what she had written. There, in her firm, bold handwriting, he read the line which meant so much—

"Killed by the judgment of God."

The woman who had just written Simeon

Krillet's epitaph laid down her pen, and took up some white sewing. To Waring, who watched her nimble fingers draw the needle in and out, it looked like a shroud. But the woman meant it for a wedding garment.

CHAPTER XVII

A FLASH OF LIGHTNING

DEBORAH had gone out to see the corn cut. She had taken the little Kaffir maid with her. The girl looked pale and anxious; it was on her heart why Waring did not speak to her of love. She knew he loved her—had he not written it in that book of his? Had she not nearly paid forfeit for his love with her life?

But why didn't he tell her so? She wondered wearily and anxiously when he would. Perhaps he thought she knew, and that no more words were needed? Still, if he would only speak——

Also, he seemed to have avoided her lately. She remembered that evening down by the sheep kraals, when he had promised to be her friend, and had pressed her close to his side. She wanted the comfort of that mute caress again; wanted it, oh, so badly! She knew that Robert Waring thought her cold and strong. Ah! when would he discover that she was warm and weak? When would he understand her as she was? Her indifference to everything in life except himself had given him a wrong impression of her

character. She belonged so completely to Waring that she could not be affected by fear or other emotions. Had she not lied to her Boer kinsfolk for his sake, and affected an indifference to a tragedy because he, her lover, had brought it about?

She looked rather wistfully at the Kaffir maid by her side, for the longing was on her to speak to someone, even a soulless Kaffir girl was better than nothing.

"Have you seen the Englishman to-day?" she asked suddenly, more to unlock the girl's lips than because she wanted to know. Deborah knew very well where Waring was. Like Ruth, she had come out to seek love in the corn-fields.

Yes, the Kaffir had seen the tall, strong Englishman. Dear Lord, and wasn't he a fine Rooi-nek! She was wise in her generation, that little Kaffir maid, and understood the tune of Deborah's heart. It was plain and easy to see that he was dying of pure love for Vrow Deborah, though wasn't the man just silly when he looked at her, and a fire could be lighted from his eyes, they burnt so as he gazed! Ja! that was love. And what a stir the wedding would make! Hadn't Vrow Deborah better be thinking of her clothes? And so the girl ran on.

Deborah smiled slowly as she listened, and the whole expression of her face softened. Had Waring seen her at that moment he might justly have compared her eyes to doves' eyes, so tender

they got, and shining. Also, a faint flush of colour stained her cheeks, a delicate rosy blush.

"Your tongue runs on too much; I must have you whipped," she said at last to the Kaffir, but that was not till she had reached the field where Waring stood breast high amongst the corn.

He came forward to greet her with some eagerness. It was strange how the feeling of Simeon Krillet's presence seemed to shadow him. It was becoming a veritable nightmare. All the past night he had cowered under the bed-clothes, perfectly assured that the dead man stood by his bedside watching him. And this man, this Robert Waring, who had scoffed at the life after death, and hesitated even to own a belief in the Divinity, had called on God to banish this vision of the night, and had become bathed in cold sweat at the mere image conjured up by fancy.

He had tried to laugh at himself when he got up, and to believe that the hot sunshine and working hard in the fields would rid him of his delusion; but even as he reaped the corn and directed the Kaffirs—surely he was not mistaken—that was Krillet's voice in the next field, Krillet himself walking through the corn! He had passed a haunted morning.

"Are you tired?" asked Deborah, when she came up to him, startled by his white face and strained eyes. "I have brought you some food, and a little dop brandy." She took a

basket from the little Kaffir as she spoke, and proffered it.

Waring shook his head with a smile. "I came provided," he answered, putting his hand in his pocket and drawing out a great handful of dried and salted apricots; "but it was very good of you to think of me. Oh, but it's hot!" He stretched out his arms, straightening his body—a fine figure outlined against the gold of the corn and blue of the sky.

Deborah looked at him admiringly, then put her hand on his arm with a pretty gesture of command. "You are not to work too hard and get hot," she said softly. "Let the Kaffirs work; but you—you are master!" She flushed a little as she said the last word.

Robert Waring glanced aside uneasily. Deborah's meaning had not been easy to mistake, and he wished himself back in England. He tried to change the subject.

"I saw a flight of locusts cross the plain yesterday," he said slowly, trying to think of some safe topic, "and it was rather marvellous. They came up like—" he cast in his mind for some imagery—"like a brown snowstorm, a moving cloud of rustling, creaking, whirring sound. You could distinctly hear the crisp fluttering of their multitude of wings, and when they spread themselves over the grass you couldn't see a blade."

"I have often seen locusts," answered Deborah with a slight smile. "Talk to me of other

things—your own land, for instance, your own people. See, I will sit down here for a moment or two, and you must rest.”

He laughed a little awkwardly.

“I’m afraid I cannot; this field must be cut to-day, and the Kaffirs will shirk work if I do.”

“Beat the lazy dogs!” her voice rang out clearly. “But you—you are not to work hard, I forbid it.”

As she spoke a cloud no bigger than a man’s hand appeared on the horizon. Deborah’s brow knit as she noticed it. She rose to her feet quickly.

“A storm is coming up,” she said; “we must hasten back to the farm.”

“Oh, I cannot go,” muttered Waring impatiently, and yet curiously fascinated by her softer and more feminine mood.

“You must take me back,” she answered calmly, “for a storm always frightens me. And we must hurry; it will be on us before long.”

They set off at a brisk pace, the woman hastening on ahead, her breath coming fast, her slender body swaying a little as she ran, her skirts brushing and rustling the corn.

Fast as she sped, Deborah only just reached the farm before the storm broke. Breathless and panting she watched its approach, standing on the stoep, Robert Waring by her side.

The dust came first, dust swept along by the wings of an angry wind—a whirling, twisting

column of sand rearing up nearly a hundred feet, the wind beating and swishing it on.

"By Jove—that's worth seeing!" muttered Waring. Then drops of rain fell; great heavy drops, spreading out like round coins.

Deborah leaned her head forward, listening. "Do you hear?" she whispered, as low across the plain came the first heavy rumble of thunder—only an angry growl; the roar was to follow.

"Don't I hear!" answered the man; then, as a sudden, almost blinding, flash illumined the sky, he added with some zest, "I say! this is going to be fine! We shall have the whole artillery of heaven on us directly."

Deborah shivered, but more with excitement than with actual fear. Storms generally terrified her, but she felt strangely exhilarated by the one sweeping up; also, she was with Waring.

It began to get very dark, the black darkness of storm. Soon the two on the stoep could not see each other's faces, could hardly distinguish each other's forms. The flashes of lightning grew more vivid, and the crackling of the thunder sounded as if overhead.

"Shall we go in?" muttered Deborah. She was beginning to get frightened; in a few seconds the rain might slash down. But Waring had no mind to heed her suggestion. He was enjoying the storm—the worst he had seen yet—and, like everything else in South Africa, it was an experience.

All at once he began to feel vaguely uneasy—"storm and tempest fulfilling His word!" He repeated the lines to himself, wondering if there really was a God who unlashd the storms, losing himself in a spirit of conjecture, marvelling vaguely over the scheme of things temporal and eternal. How easily the next flash of lightning might kill him! Then he thought how suddenly Krillet had died. A blinding flash at that moment streaked out, dazzling, terrific. In that second Waring saw the plain for a good thirty miles—and in the foreground Simeon Krillet—then the dark.

He turned to enter the farm. Deborah was crouching by the door. "Oh, come in! Come in!" she muttered.

"One doesn't see a storm like this every day," he answered, his mouth twitching nervously.

"My God, no!" she murmured; then with a little shudder she left the room.

Waring was alone. Some involuntary fascination drew him back to the stoep. He wanted to see—to be sure. It was dark, so he waited. A blinding flash—yes, Simeon Krillet stood there! The next flash—O God, that face!

He could stand it no longer. The house—let him get into the house! Waring turned and fled into the house, hungry for human company. Deborah was not there. He felt alone, and for once in his life he shook with fear. He shuddered, and muttered the dead man's name.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN THE DEAD RETURN

ROBERT WARING was stricken down with fever. He had sickened and gone to his bed the night following the great thunderstorm. The next morning he babbled of green fields, and tossed restlessly from side to side. He had no sign of recognition for Deborah ; he only glanced at her with bright, feverish eyes ; but he complained in a shrill, parrot-like voice that the light streaming in through the window dazzled him. So she pulled the blind down, and did her best to darken the window with a thick curtain.

She had had some little experience of sickness, enough at least to tell her that the man was very ill, yet she dared not send for a doctor. To begin with, she could not get hold of one for at least fifty hours, so long was the distance to the nearest town ; and, for another, she had no idea how much or how little of the truth Robert Waring might not reveal in his delirium.

She determined to nurse him herself with the help of the little Kaffir maid ; this not so much for her own safety as for his, for if the real

circumstances of Simeon Krillet's death ever came out, it was not Deborah Krillet who would suffer—it would be Robert Waring, the Englishman.

For the first day the sick man did little else but toss wearily and complain of his aching eyes and head. Deborah put her hand on his forehead, and his skin almost burnt her. She hastened after that to steep rags in cold water, and laid them like a bandage on the hot brow. His hair she clipped at with her scissors, with some instinctive knowledge of what should be done. She made cooling drinks, and fed her patient lightly. Possibly her great love helped her to play the nurse's part with some slight discretion, and to do the best thing with the materials ready to her hand.

Perhaps, notwithstanding her great anxiety—for almost from the first it was easy to see that his illness might go hard with Robert Waring—Deborah had never been so happy in her life. This white moth of destiny, blown upon so harshly by many a cruel, rough wind, hardened by the special circumstances of her environment, had now ceased to flutter and beat her wings against Fate's window-pane. She was in the room at last, and though the lamp might ultimately burn and shrivel her existence out, better that a thousand times than a lingering death of starvation in the dark.

She sat by the sick man's bed, waving a palm-leaf fan slowly backwards and forwards to keep the flies off, her eyes never leaving his

face, her brain alert and eager to listen to every word he said, even foolish words of no understanding.

Deborah liked to realise that he was helpless and utterly dependent on her. It was a fine pleasure to minister to his needs; the mere soaking linen in water and then placing it on his forehead became an exquisite joy, and whenever she raised his head to enable him to sip the drink she was giving him, delicious tremors shot through her frame. More than once she rested her lips lightly on his aching forehead, blushing scarlet as she did so, and often she would crouch on the floor by the side of the bed, holding his hot fingers between her cool palms.

"Dear Lord," the Kaffir girl used to mutter to herself as she watched Deborah in those days, "wasn't the vrow mad to be making such a stir about a Rooi-nek, a poor paid servant, no good at all! Why, he hadn't even a broadcloth coat with his clothes, and couldn't whip anyone to really hurt them." Here the girl curled her lips as she remembered lashings she had received at the hand of Simeon Krillet. "Still, the Englishman could shoot straight. Ja, he could do that, and he was good to look at. Perhaps Vrow Deborah was not so mad after all to sit by his side all day." And here the Kaffir girl would shrug her lean shoulders and crouch down outside the door, ready to enter if her mistress called her name.

The days passed on and the fever slowly strengthened. There were fierce, terrible hours when Waring sat up in bed, staring hard in front of him, his eyes terror-filled and blood-shot.

"There he is; can you not see him?" he would shriek out wildly before falling back exhausted against the pillows. "Simeon Krillet—the man I killed . . . he cannot sleep . . . he has come to see me . . . and he points to me with his hand. . . ."

"Hush, for God's sake, hush!" Deborah would murmur, as these wild cries rang through the lonely farm. "I tell you there is no one in this room except ourselves; Simeon is dead." Then she would try to push the man back with her cold, trembling hands. But he would start up in another moment, still with the same awful shriek of fear, still protesting that the dead man was watching him.

And sometimes, sometimes at the darkest hour of night, when the farm was wrapped in silence, and not even the bark of a stray cur broke the cold peace of the evening, Deborah used to wonder if Robert Waring was right, and that Simeon Krillet really stood in the room, unseen by her eyes, but real to the man who had killed him. It might be so—truly it might—and, if so, in what spirit had he come? Was the lust for revenge so strong that it had enabled the dead man to burst from the grave and to appear to the startled living, and would

he never cease to point and haunt till Robert Waring had come out to join him? His creed had been "an eye for an eye," "a life for a life." Had he risen from the dead to enforce it?

A fierce resentment came over the woman, and a wild, passionate hatred. She felt no fear, not she, and when Robert Waring fixed his eyes on the special spot where he fancied Krillet stood, she went forward boldly and beat the air with her outstretched hands.

"Go back to your grave," she said in a low, fierce voice. "Do you hear me, Simeon? Go down to the pit. In the name of the Almighty, who gave the earth to the living, I command you from this room! The dead must go to their own place, it is the law of God."

Her wild speech and the fight she made with her hands gave Robert Waring a curious sense of protection and comfort.

"He is going, Deborah," he cried, with the whimper of a cowed and frightened child. "Push him back against the wall. See, he is beginning to fade away. Ah!" He gave a weary, half-satisfied smile, and the madness of fever began to leave his eyes. He looked at Deborah with semi-recognition. "You are so strong," he said slowly. "You are not the Shulamite of the garden. I was wrong when I said you were. She was soft and gentle, and her eyes were the eyes of a dove."

"Who am I, then?" asked the girl brokenly,

shivering under the condemnation of his glance and tone.

"I don't know," he replied wearily. "Like Jael, perhaps; she was strong, and cruel, and cold."

The slow words fell like flail-blows on Deborah Krillet's heart. She winced painfully, then looked hard at him.

"Do you mean what you say, Robert?" She used his Christian name fearlessly and boldly. "Am I a hard, cold woman?"

"Yes!" he answered, feebly and pettishly, trying to struggle against the painful lassitude that was creeping over him, and hardly realising the meaning of his words. "You must be, to be so strong. Jael was strong."

"My God!" She spoke with inexpressible bitterness, her mouth trembling and her eyes filling with hot, blinding tears. "So that is what you think me—cruel, cold, and strong?" She sank on her knees by the side of his bed, and buried her face in the thick folds of the coarse blue coverlets.

"Dear Lord," she muttered brokenly, "is that all he knows of me? Isn't it for his sake I have made myself cold and strong, and forced myself to play a hateful part? Can no man living understand a woman, or the motive for her actions? Because I have fought hell for the sake of Robert Waring, I am no longer to be loved and cherished?"

She rose to her feet and flung up her arms

with a sharp cry. "I wonder if Jael suffered too," she muttered, "or if men only love women for their weakness? Perhaps she slew Sisera because her husband was a fighting man, and she feared future battles, and when her lord came home and found what she had done, he turned from her! Like enough—like enough! And when she shouted and danced among the people, ah,"—her breath came in short gasps,— "perhaps Jael would have desired to be the Shulamite, the Shulamite waiting love in the garden, only the nail was in Sisera's forehead, and his blood had sprinkled her hands." The woman dropped on her knees again; once more the little proud face was hidden, and only her heaving sobs proclaimed that she suffered; but Robert Waring had fallen asleep. Deborah Krillet had driven Simeon back to his grave, and he would haunt Waring no more.

Silence crept round and about the lonely farm; silence walked on the veldt; and in the sick-room there was no movement of life beyond the deep breathing of the sleeping man and the low sobs of the weeping woman—the woman who had sold her birthright.

CHAPTER XIX

"I AM THE MAN"

"Did I talk much rubbish, I wonder?" Robert Waring lay on the sofa in the little parlour and glanced up at Deborah. She was sitting in her usual chair, busily engaged with some knitting. Three weeks had elapsed since Waring's illness; this was the first day he had felt strong enough to get downstairs.

Deborah clicked her needles and bent her head low over the sock. Waring watched her and repeated his question.

"No, not much," she announced slowly, a painful smile on her lips. "I have almost forgotten now what you did talk about; I was too anxious about your health to listen to your speech."

He glanced up at her, relieved. He feared lest he might have spoken about Joan, and he did not wish to discuss her with Deborah Krillet. He had an uneasy conviction, strengthened almost to a certainty, that the Boer woman loved him, and he was painfully anxious to spare her as much suffering as he could. In another month

or two he would be able to leave the farm ; till then let Deborah Krillet imagine anything she liked. Afterwards, when he had gone, she would forget him. So he argued, measuring a woman's memory by a man's.

"What I remember most," he went on dreamily, "was a night when I fancy I must have been pretty bad. I seemed all at once to get away from my bed and room, and to be walking in a great forest—a regular forest of fire. All the trees seemed to be aflame ; and the flowers, they glowed with flame too—warm, bright flame. The sky overhead was black, just like velvet, and the grass was like a black carpet, and so soft. You were there too, a faint will-o'-the-wisp sort of creature, and you floated ahead, just a few feet ahead, of me. Wasn't it queer, a forest of flame against a sky of black ? Then another time"—he was talking in slow, contemplative tones—"I seemed to be a bead, swung on a string with a lot of other beads, and some unseen hand twirled the string round and round and round—just as it seemed out of pure caprice. I felt pretty giddy after a time, I know, but it wasn't much use praying the hand to stop ; I was just a bead, put on the string to be twirled round with the other beads." He smiled rather whimsically.

"You must not think about those bad dreams any longer," remarked Deborah, rising to her feet. She walked away, but soon came back with a bowl of soup, which she handed to War-

ing. "Will you drink this, please?" she said gently. "It is strong; I made it for you myself."

He took it from her hands, and as he did so it came upon him with an odd thrill of emotion that she had grown more beautiful. The cold strength seemed to have melted from her face.

She had won back the delicate charm of the Shulamite. Also, there was more in her smile than the wistful query of youth, and more in her eyes than the soft innocence of girlhood. He felt as if he had discovered something marvelously precious, yet something he must turn his eyes from with resolution. He never faltered for a second in his devotion or loyalty to Joan Desborough—yet if there had been no Joan? Well, any man might have painted Deborah Krillet in the foreground of life's canvas, and been well content. For Robert Waring was beginning to forget that she had rejoiced over an old man's death, and stood smiling by a newly filled in grave. He only knew that she was young and fair, and quoted softly under his breath, "Behold, thou art fair, my love! Behold, thou art fair!" Aloud he said gently, half retaining her hand as he handed back the bowl—

"Do you know that your nursing has saved my life, and I want to say, 'Thank you'?"

She flushed, and looked up at him with moist eyes.

"You have no need to thank me. I saved

your life selfishly, for my own sake as much as yours."

There, she had told him all!—all. He knew now that he could be master when he chose of the lonely farm, and that she, Deborah Krillet, returned his love, for the girl clung blindly to her belief. It was not for nothing he had written about her in his diary. She could remember every line—every word. As for the day during his sickness when he had addressed her as Jael—well, that was a bad day, but it was over; the rolling wings of time had swept it away for ever, and it was as the Shulamite he thought of her now, as a bride walking in the spice garden. So the woman thought to herself, whilst the man watched her, confused and startled. He had never expected such an open declaration. He had lived amongst women who shrouded up their passions and confined Love at his birth, and Deborah's speech was a revelation. He hastened to change the tone of the conversation, yet he felt at the same time a curious longing to know what she might have said had he remained silent.

"I have been writing something this morning," he began awkwardly, "something I ought to have written before."

"What is it?" she asked slowly, wondering if he had written down a declaration of his love for her. Some men did that, she knew, only she would never have supposed it of Waring; his words flowed too easily, and he

wooded best with his eyes—for she misread his eyes, as she had misread his diary.

He drew out a large white envelope from the breast-pocket of his coat and handed it to her silently. She opened it with fingers that trembled a little, and her heart beat rapidly. Then, as she ran her eyes over the sheet of paper that fell out, her face became very pale, and she looked at Waring nervously.

"This is an account," she said, very slowly and in low tones, "of the way Simeon met his death. Why have you done this, and written down in black and white that you killed him?" She tapped the paper restlessly with her fingers. "And this address at the bottom of the page—New College Club, London—what does that mean?" Her voice had become nervous and agitated, and she dug the toe of her shoe into the carpet.

"I put down that address," answered Waring quietly, "because it is one that is pretty sure to find me. It is my club, and they generally have my letters forwarded on. I send them my address from all quarters of the globe to enable my letters to be sent on after me." He paused a moment, then went on rapidly, "As to what I have written, I want you to keep that paper. I ought to have written it out before. Imagine, for instance, if instead of doing credit to your nursing I had happened to die!" He noticed that she shuddered a little as he spoke, and he was not displeased

by this touch of tremor. "Well, suppose again, by some most unlikely chance, that it was discovered by some officious kinsman digging up his grave and opening the coffin, that Simeon Krillet had been shot. It might happen, you know; he has two brothers still alive."

"Yes," she said quietly, "it might happen. I have thought of that contingency. But it is not likely."

"Not likely, certainly!" he went on quickly. "But still, as you observe, possible. Well, what would your position be without my testimony declaring I am the man who killed Simeon Krillet? Why, you might be accused of his murder—you!"

She smiled faintly, put down the paper on a table by her side, and went on with her knitting.

"If you were here they would not accuse me," she said slowly; "and if you were dead what would it matter what they did to me? Do you think I should care or mind?" She looked up at him almost defiantly, and, as once before, he marvelled at the firmness of the little chin.

"Deborah, don't be foolish!" He spoke sternly. "Take up that paper, and keep it! Do you really imagine you would care to be charged with the murder of your husband, or that I could know a single moment's peace with the mere idea of such a thing being possible? Death comes so easily and so

suddenly—a flash of lightning, the tripping of a horse, a drink of tainted water. I thought myself a strong man three weeks ago, but for all my strength—well, you know what a tussle I had to make for my life. Suppose I had gone under, and left you with no proof of your innocence except the bare word of a Kaffir girl, which goes for nothing. It would have made my death a very hard one, a very hard one indeed. Now, be reasonable, dear girl!" He looked at her pleadingly, his dark eyes roving over her pale face, his hands proffering the closely written sheet of paper.

She paused for a second; then took it from him and hid it in the bosom of her dress. "Because you wish me to," she said slowly.

"Thank you," he answered gravely. "You have taken a great load off my mind."

A week later saw Robert Waring on his way to the town over the hills, the town he had visited once before. It was necessary that he should make the expedition and have out the big ox-waggon, for stores were needed, and he also had to purchase some farming apparatus. On his part the man was delighted to go. He was hungering for letters from home, and guessed rightly he should find a pile waiting for him at the small post-office. How eager he would be to see what Joan had written! She would write, as usual, on her dainty mauve notepaper. Her handwriting was large and untidy, and her spelling bad; but what matter?

It would be her thoughts he would read—her dear, sweet thoughts. She could be amusing, too, when she liked, and her letter would be redolent of the perfume she affected, and her pretty initial would be stamped both on paper and envelope. The man smiled to himself as he pictured the good pleasure waiting him. It helped to banish a certain sad vision of Deborah Krillet.

How lonely and pathetic she had looked standing in the porch, and waving her farewell to him! She had been nervous about his taking the journey; strangely reluctant to bid him go; ready to seize the first chance of postponing it.

Well, when he returned a week later he must begin to speak of his real departure, and to suggest the hiring of another overseer. Sooner or later Deborah Krillet must realise that she had given her love unasked. He was sorry for her, hatefully sorry, and he loathed himself for having to cause her pain. Yet it was not his fault. He had never spoken or hinted of love to her. Like Diana's kiss, she had bestowed it on him unsought.

She had merely been a beautiful woman to him—no more, no less. He was the lover of Joan Desborough. This he repeated to himself at least a hundred times as the great ox-wagon creaked along, the Kalfir boys running alongside and cracking their whips. Yet, try as he would, he could not banish the picture of the lonely woman standing on the porch of the

lonely farm from his mind. What had she called out, a note of sharp distress in her voice?

"You will return? swear to me you'll return!"

"Of course I will!" he had answered cheerily. "Don't get nervous!"

Now, why had she raised her voice in such a pitiful cry, and why had the cry pierced him to the very heart? Deborah Krillet was nothing to him and Joan Desborough all. Yet when he fell into uneasy slumber it was not of Joan that he dreamed. He was walking through cornfields at even, and the Shulamite met him in the corn.

CHAPTER XX

MISS JOAN DESBOROUGH

FORTUNATELY it is not given to mortals to have special insight into the thoughts and dreams of others, or Joan Desborough, sitting by the fire in England, might have resented her lover's conduct.

As it was she smiled rather happily as she gazed into the glowing embers. She was a pretty, dark-haired little creature. Her large eyes were soft and brown, and her hair strayed in delicious tendrils over her white forehead. She loved everything that was sweet, and soft, and warm, and, like a hot-house plant, depended on luxury for existence.

Now she had cuddled herself up on the white fur rug, and pulled a soft silk dressing-gown tightly round her, yet she still held out her hands to the fire and rejoiced over its warmth. Within reach lay a huge box of Fuller's chocolates, and by her side a tiny writing-pad. She was obviously going to write a letter, for a small gold pen was stuck through the coil of her hair like a dagger. This was a trick of hers when

writing. A half-finished epistle lay on the ground, and resting by it was the only letter she had received from Robert Waring since his arrival at the farm on the plain.

"I wonder what she's like; this beautiful Shulamite?" she thought laughingly. "Robert is too funny about her, and the dreadful old husband. I expect she's not a bit pretty, really; he says she is not like me." Self-depreciation was not a sin that could ever be laid to Joan Desborough's charge. As she smiled the door of her bedroom opened softly, and her sister, Olive Denvers, entered.

Mrs. Denvers was an exact replica of Joan, both in personality and temperament. She was the bride of a few months, and to be spoilt suited her.

"How comfy," she purred, nestling down by her sister's side, and helping herself to a huge chocolate. She nibbled at sweets so daintily that no one had the heart to accuse her of greed. "Joan, dear, isn't it splendid that Robert is going to be such a rich man! You were right to get engaged to him after all." Mrs. Denvers referred to the fact that, all unknown to himself, Robert Waring had succeeded to the property he had formerly been land-agent for. This had come to pass owing to a carriage accident having caused the death of his uncle and cousin, and the property being entailed.

"Yes, it's nice to think that we shall be very very, very rich!" answered Joan meditatively.

"But, you see, I've got plenty of money myself, and I really got engaged to Robert because I like him better than anyone else. He's so nice and quaint,"—she gazed into the fire, a little smile curving her red lips. "Do you know, Olive," she went on slowly, "I want him back badly; I want my hair stroked, and my eyes kissed—you know, don't you?"

"Of course I do," replied the bride, "and I think it horrid of him to stay away so long. Cecil would never——"

"But Cecil isn't clever!" interrupted Joan, with a shrug of her shoulders. "He would find nothing to interest him in a farm stuck down on a plain. He wouldn't make a romance out of a red-haired Boer woman and an old horror of a husband, and make it sound like a Bible story. I love Robert's letters; they are so interesting." She helped herself to a chocolate, then passed the box to Olive.

"They are good!" murmured the other. "Take one of the big square ones, Joan; they are simply delicious. Now, about Robert. When he comes back from Africa—which I suppose he will do when he learns what has happened—you'll get married at once?"

Joan nodded her head. "Yes, I suppose so," she said slowly; then added rather pensively, "Sometimes—not often—Olive—I wish I was clever. Robert must think me an awful little dunce. Now we are engaged it does not matter so much, for it's nice to sit still and make love;

but when we are married, what shall we talk about?" Her face of distress was comical, and she clasped her little hands.

Olive burst out laughing. "Oh, don't be so silly, Joan! What's the use of being clever! You are as pretty as a picture; isn't that enough for a man?"

"But Robert gets tired of looking at the same picture always; do you know that, Olive?" Joan sighed rather wearily.

"You can always do your hair in a different way," replied the bride. "What has made you so thoughtful to-night? You are generally cheerful enough. Is anything worrying you, Joan?"

"No," returned the girl, "I am really very happy. I was looking at pictures in the fire when you came in. But I wish sometimes I was a stronger sort of character. We are rather like dolls, you know, Olive—you and I."

"Pretty ones," remarked Olive Denvers with some emphasis. "Don't forget that important fact, Joan; it means a good deal. Why, my dear child, if you were the most clever woman on God's earth, and had the soul of a saint and the heart of an angel, would Robert ever have looked at you? Do you fancy if your chin had sloped backwards and your eyes had a cast in them—— No, my Joan," and she laughed merrily. "Men are strange critters; but they are sensible on the whole, and value beauty at its worth. Now I'm going." She rose to her feet

with a quick, bird-like movement, her orange silk tea-gown trailing on the ground. "I only came in to beg a few chocolates. I've eaten my box empty." She kissed her sister lightly on her cheek and left the room, humming a little French chanson as she went.

Joan Desborough, left alone, wandered to the window and pulled aside the blind. The wide London street looked strangely deserted, for it was past midnight, but the roar of traffic could be heard—that sleepless, tireless beast that toils at night as well as by day, and whose maw is never satisfied.

The yellow light of the lamps flickered a little, and cast strange and weird reflections, making a commonplace street for the moment a vague and mysterious thoroughfare. The sky was dark and cloud-laden; few stars were out. Joan turned away with a little shiver, and came back to the fire. She took up the letter she had begun to write to her lover, and added a few lines: "I miss you really horribly. It is no fun at all going to dances and things. If I flirt and amuse myself, I feel dreadfully guilty when I come home and see your photograph staring at me from the mantel-piece. And if I don't go out, what's the good of buying pretty frocks? Are you glad you are going to be so rich? You must buy me a necklace quite as large as the one Cecil gave Olive; but I don't want diamonds, I would rather have rubies." She paused here and held up her left hand to the light. She was wearing

a pretty hoop of pearls, but she looked at the ring with some disfavour, badge of betrothal though it was. "Pearls are poor sickly things at best!" she muttered rather pettishly. "Now Robert is such a rich man he must buy me another engagement ring—a really magnificent one this time! I want him to give me a lot of jewellery. It looks so well in the wedding account: 'the bridegroom presented the bride with——'"

And Joan Desborough gave her lively imagination a full rein, and visited more than one great Bond Street jeweller in fancy.

While the girl who was to be Robert Waring's wife indulged in these reflections, Deborah Krillet was also day-dreaming. She was sitting on the stoep, drinking in the cool breeze of early dawn, and thinking of the Englishman.

"I will give him all—all!" she whispered half out loud, gazing round at the fields which now were hers. "I will put everything I have in his hand, and I will put my head on his heart."

CHAPTER XXI

AT THE CROSS-WAYS

As he had expected, Robert Waring found a budget of letters awaiting him at the post-office of the little town. On arriving he had made it his first object to go in search of these. Business might wait till the morning—he was in no hurry about those stores and agricultural implements. Letters from home were of primary importance.

He had entered the town with a sense of relief. Here, amid the bustle of humanity, he seemed to regain something of his own personality. In touch with his fellow-men, he felt as if a burden were lifted from him, the weight of a strained, unnatural existence such as he had been leading since the death of Simeon Krillet.

Out on the lonely veldt, as the great wagon rumbled ponderously along the rough track, he had longed for solitude, yet, though for miles around there was no sign of human life, he was not alone. The Kaffirs, they were there, of course, gabbling strange phrases to the oxen,

laughing foolishly to each other, flicking at the teasing flies with the long lashes of their whips—but they did not count in the consideration of human companionship. Waring sat well back in the wagon, dozing sometimes, still weak from the effects of his illness, and his thoughts took form and harassed him by their contact.

Deborah sat by his side; he could feel her slender form as she nestled closer to him, the touch of her soft fingers as they gripped the hand that hung idly down, the warmth of her breath as she whispered in his ear, "You are not leaving me, Robert? You, who have taught me to love!" That is what she was saying. "You swore to return to me, and I am here to hold you to your word."

And on the other side of him, stiff, erect, bloodstained—Simeon Krillet. No ghost, such as had haunted him in his illness, and which Deborah had conjured away. Waring recognised this for what it was, a mere thought, but painful in its intensity. The rough-lined face of the Boer seemed colourless and void of expression—except in the eyes; they alone seemed alive; they alone spoke. "There is no escape from the justice of God!" Such was the meaning they conveyed. "An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth!" Robert Waring found himself repeating these words over and over again to the rumble of the cart-wheels till the monotony of them goaded him to fury. He sought to conjure up the sweet face of Joan Desborough,

hoping thereby to break the thrall that held him, but the English girl would not answer his call. She had no place on the broad veldt; she had no part in the tragedy of the lonely farm.

In the town there was no room for shadows. As Waring emerged from the post-office with the letters, he squared his shoulders, laughed, and felt himself again the man he had been before the morbid influences that hung over Simeon Krillet's farm had entangled him. Well, thank Heaven, he had strength enough to free himself. A week in the town—there was plenty of work to do, but he was his own master, and could attend to it at his leisure; his mind would be relieved and fortified by the time he returned to his duty—the harvest that had to be gathered in—and he would be the better able to break the news to Deborah that his stay in Africa must be brought to a close. He would not allow himself to picture the pain that would leap to her eyes. "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof," he muttered as he put the thought behind him.

He thought he would read his letters quietly in the pleasant shade of the hotel stoep. Thither, accordingly, he hurried, and sat himself down at a little table. A cigar of uncertain quality and a brandy-and-soda—expensive luxuries—made him feel more content with himself and with the world at large. He was in no wise troubled by the black looks thrown

at him by a little group of Boers who had installed themselves under the trees in front of the building, and were evidently discussing the political situation. Was he not accustomed to be looked upon as a cursed Uitlander? It did not occur to him that he might be recognised here as the overseer of Simeon Krillet's farm.

But as such he was recognised. "Who is the Rooi-nek?" growled a burly, black-bearded individual, who sat astride his chair and flicked at his boots with a heavy sjambok. "I don't think I've seen him in these parts before."

The innkeeper, who was of the group, shook his head. "He belongs to some outlying farm, but I don't know which. He came here for a few nights some while ago. But he does not speak to us of his affairs."

"I know him." A younger man joined in the conversation. "I know him to my cost." He turned with angry eyes to the unconscious Englishman, and then closed his mouth with a snap.

"What is it, Jan? In what way has he harmed you? Tell us about him." But Jan van Kerrel was in no communicative mood, and refused to satisfy the curiosity of his companions. He was of a reticent nature; also, he rather enjoyed the possession of a secret. For awhile he played with the numerous questions that were showered upon him.

In the meanwhile Robert Waring was calmly scanning the letters which had been penned to

him by the girl he loved. Mentally he was far away from the little African town, and the tireless murmur of a great city was in his ears. With Joan Desborough he sat in the stalls of a theatre and criticised the play; with her he danced at some fashionable crush, or, more enjoyable still, sat out on a palm-shaded balcony; he entered into her life, enjoying with her all the trivial doings of which she thought well to tell him. But most of all, he liked her letters when she told him of her thoughts; it was then he felt nearest to her. He laughed at the repeated assertion that she was only a shallow little person made to be petted: "But I love you to pet and make a fuss of me, Robert, and I do want you back more than I can say. You are so nice and strong, and when you put your arm round me I feel that dancing and flirting and dressing myself prettily is not really everything in life." So she wrote, and it was very typical of her. These reiterated assertions amused Robert Waring, he was so conscious of the truth of them. The very perfume of her letter-paper represented Joan Desborough to his mind. To him it was a charming trait in her character that she was so dependent, a hot-house plant that could not thrive unless it were carefully tended and guarded from the boisterous winds at which the flowers of the garden mocked. Why, it was because she had to be spoilt that he loved her so—as if by very contrast to his own nature.

The eternal contrast! As he smiled at the

pretty artificialities so evident in every line that Joan wrote, the figure of the other woman, natural and primitive, intruded itself. It seemed strange that there should be even the affinity of sex between Joan Desborough and Deborah Krillet. What centuries rolled between this dainty product of exaggerated civilisation and the Shulamite woman whom the wise king had honoured—centuries of toil, of progress, and of blood! The orchid and the wild rose of the hedgerow, they were not more widely separated. Yet how beautiful, each in its degree, these flowers, each with its mission to perform, its pleasure to impart, its life to live.

Robert Waring was reading Joan's letters in their consecutive order. He had not read many lines of the last before he put it down and knitted his brows in surprise. What did it mean? To what was she referring? "Before you receive this you will have heard the news, my Robert; and if I say I am glad, will you think me very, very selfish? I cannot feel for others when all my thoughts are for you. We have waited so long, haven't we? and it has been so hard to be parted from you all this time. And now we will be rich, and you will return. Oh, you will return at once, won't you?"

It was at this point that Robert put down the letter. Rich, he? There was only one way by which he could inherit money, and the chance of that was very remote. He turned to the other letters lying by his side, and his eyes fell upon a

long envelope addressed in the formal handwriting of a clerk, and betraying its importance by the care with which it was sealed.

Could it be possible? He tore open the cover and read the name of the firm of solicitors who acted for his uncle's property. The communication was brief and to the point. It informed him that owing to the death of his two relatives he, Robert Waring, had automatically succeeded to the ownership of a valuable estate. "We trust that you will see your way to return to England very shortly," so the letter concluded, "as there are many matters to be settled which will require your personal attention. Trusting that the confidence which your uncle reposed in us——" and so on till they begged to remain his faithful servants.

It is always the unexpected that happens. From that day forth the course of Robert Waring's life was altered. So far he had himself taken the helm, now he could rest and profit by the labour of others.

Was he wholly pleased? For the moment he could not be certain. He had been proud of his self-reliance, the spirit of the wanderer was entirely alive within him; he had wished to succeed by his own exertions. There was no merit in inheriting money, in accepting unworked-for comforts.

The death of his uncle and cousin did not greatly affect him. The fact that he had quarrelled with the former had nothing to do

with his rather callous acceptance of the fact. Death was inevitable; he did not fear it for himself, and he deprecated any pronounced display of emotion because others had been called upon to pay their share of the universal debt. There was much of fatalism in his disposition, and he would have thought it selfish and futile to weep even for the loss of what he loved best in the world.

Such were his first thoughts when he learnt of his inheritance. Others crowded quickly into his brain. This fortune—it would render his marriage with Joan immediately possible. At one step he had attained to that which he most desired. Birth, marriage, death—how closely the pieces of the puzzle fit!

He picked up Joan's letter and finished reading it. How daintily unselfish she had been, and how evident was her desire for his return! Suddenly it struck him that his prolonged absence must have seemed cruel to her, for surely it was to her that he owed himself, of her alone that he should think. And latterly had he not bestowed his thoughts too readily upon another woman, the Shulamite, whom he had pictured walking through the cornfields at even, Deborah, who awaited his return to the lonely farm? He felt instinctively the anxiety with which she would look for the appearance of the ox-wagon, sweeping the horizon day by day with her eyes. And why? He could no longer conceal from himself the truth, though he had been

accustomed to put it away from him with a shudder whenever it became over-obtrusive.

Deborah had grown to love him, and he—he had no love to bestow. Often recently—since she had made that open declaration by which he had learnt the truth—he had asked himself how far he was to blame; but when he came to analyse the events of their acquaintance, he had been unable to fix any peculiar guilt upon himself. It had all come about so gradually. Certainly he had felt the necessity of flight, and he had taken steps to act upon the impulse.

And now a full excuse was provided him. His land, newly inherited, summoned him; duty bade him be up and claim his own; Joan pleaded with him prettily.

Yet he had given his promise that he would return to the farm on the veldt, and he was a man of his word. Deborah trusted him; could he deceive her? Could he leave her, a woman, alone to gather in the harvest? It was a man's work, and surely the presence of a master was needed on the farm.

He rose, lost in thought, and leaned over the balustrade of the stoep. The sound of voices came to his ears.

"It was the Lord's wish that my house should be empty, my hearth bare." Young Jan van Kerrel, under the influence of a strong glass of "dop brandy," had become communicative, and opened his soul to his companions. "I accepted it because it was God's will. But now, my

friends, now it is different. Simeon Krillet is dead, and were it not for this cursed 'foreigner,' this Robert Waring——"

As if impelled by some irresistible force he looked up, and his eyes met those of the Englishman.

CHAPTER XXII

AN EXPLANATION

IT was evident to Jan van Kerrel that he had been overheard, that his insult could not pass unnoticed, and under the circumstances there remained no course open to him but to face the situation. Truth to tell, he was not of a pugnacious nature, and he had no desire to be involved in a quarrel with the Englishman, at whose broad shoulders he glanced askance. But his friends had grasped the humour of the position, and he caught the lurking smile on the face of Christian Deplan, the big grizzled Boer of the old school, so uncouth and yet so strong. Jan himself was slight and clean-shaven; he had disappointed his sturdy "dopper" father by the inclination which he had manifested for town life, and when in the ordinary course of events he had inherited the farm of his fathers, he had proved himself a sorry manager of a goodly estate. As a "predikant" he might have flourished, as a farmer he was a failure. He was a good fellow at heart, but he was unfortunate enough to be possessed of a romantic tempera-

ment, which was wholly out of place on a Boer farm.

Robert Waring was taken wholly by surprise when he heard his name, with insulting terms appended thereto, pronounced by a man whom to his knowledge he had never seen in his life. The words which he had inadvertently caught gave him a slight clue as to the cause of the young Boer's irritation. A sudden hope shot to his brain.

Jan van Kerrel continued to bluster, but it was in a minor key. His companions smiled at him encouragingly.

"It is true, sirs, these Rooi-neks come to our country unbidden and unwanted. Our homesteads are no longer our own, the trade of our towns is in their hands, they would dig up our land in search of their sordid gold." He had started on generalities as the safest course, but his present grievance was so strong that he was unable to restrain his tongue. "What wonder, then, that our wives and our maidens are not safe from the lust of their eyes? But that a Boer women, born and bred in the country, married to a man of her own race, widowed by the visitation,"—he had almost said "mercy"—"of God, should——"

It was at this moment that Robert Waring interrupted the speaker. He had no wish to listen to a diatribe spoken at him by such a man, or, in fact, by any man at all. His prevailing sensation was one of amusement mingled with a

touch of surprise at the hazard of the meeting. He had gathered that this young man must be an admirer of Deborah Krillet, and that his words were prompted by jealousy. If he only knew how little cause he had for such jealousy! It was wholly without anger that Waring descended from the stoep and approached the little group.

"Pardon me," he said politely, "but I accidentally overheard my name. I had no idea that I was sufficiently known in this town to be an object of interest. Can I be of any service to you?"

He addressed the latter words directly to Van Kerrel. The young man turned to him with an air of defiance, behind which lurked much of his native nervousness.

"I did not speak to you, Englese," he muttered.

"But of me," returned Waring easily.

"I spoke to my friends. Why were you listening? It is said that the eavesdropper——"

He paused. Waring laughed lightly. He had no intention of lending himself to a quarrel with this youth. The other men looked on with expressionless eyes. It was no affair of theirs. They would have welcomed the discomfiture of the Rooi-nek, but they had little faith in their own champion. They were curious to see to what extent Van Kerrel would show fight.

"It seems that you are better acquainted with

me than I with you," said Waring at last, "also that you have a grievance against me."

"A grievance—yes."

"Would you mind stating it? I am not aware that I have wronged you in any way. Of course," he added, "if your grievance is not against me personally but against my race, that is a different matter." His eyes sparkled, "I should resent it differently also."

Van Kerrel glanced at his friends. Now was their opportunity if they wished to confuse the cursed foreigner. But they maintained an unaltered appearance of passive attention. Van Kerrel must fight his own battles.

"It is you—you," he gasped. "You have smitten me heavily; you have taken from me that which my heart desired."

So it was as Waring had surmised. Jealousy was at the root of the outbreak. He reached out his hand kindly and rested it on the young man's shoulder.

"I think I understand what is in your mind," he said gravely, "and I should like to prove to you that you are wrong to blame me. Then perhaps, you will withdraw the expression of which you made use." He glanced at the deserted stoep. "This is a personal matter, and I am sure your friends will excuse you if you will give me a few minutes' private talk with you. By the bye, I do not know your name, and as you know mine——"

"My name is Jan van Kerrel," muttered the

youth. He had risen nervously from his seat. He did not know how to behave with this self-possessed man, who was treating him almost as he might treat a child.

"Then, Broer van Kerrel, if I may have a word with you on the stoep——"

Waring moved away complacently, and the Boer followed, looking intensely foolish and sheepish. The older men grunted and despatched the landlord for more brandy. They had expected nothing better of young Jan.

"How is it that you know me so well?" asked Waring, as soon as he had taken a seat beside his new companion.

"I am a friend of Vrow Krillet's brother," returned the other. "I have seen you on the farm with him. I came, too, after the death of the old man. I wanted to know. I learnt that day all that I desired."

Looking more closely at the Boer, Waring remembered having seen him at the farm. But his mind had been too occupied with other matters to pay great heed to his visitors that day.

"I remember," he said. "Yes, your face appears to me familiar." He paused, and then put a direct question.

"You are in love with Vrow Krillet?"

"We were children together, she and I." The youth spoke more naturally, moved by intense feeling. For the moment he forgot that he was addressing a man whom he had looked upon as

an enemy. "The farm of her people adjoined that of my father. As soon as I was old enough I wanted to make her my wife. But the old folk would not have it. Deborah was so poor, and I had nothing to look forward to. My brother was alive then, and it was to him that the farm would belong. Deborah liked me, but she never loved,"—he shook his head sadly; "no, she never loved. I did not think she ever would, but I saw the love-light in her eyes that day. It is you that kindled it—you, the Englishman, the foreigner."

Waring raised his hand, having no wish that the conversation should become heated. "Tell me more about yourself," he said kindly.

"What is there to tell?" replied Van Kerrel. "I wanted her to be my wife, and I vowed that I would marry no other woman in the world. They took her away, and gave her to an old man because of his riches. But thieves break in and steal; and it is not always gold they take——"

"You mean that I——"

"I mean that you have stolen a woman's heart. Deborah was not the same woman after you came to the farm. Her brother told me so. And I—I kept away, and my food was bitter in my mouth. My father died; my brother died. The farm was mine. But it was empty and desolate for me without the woman I loved. I could not live in it. And now—now it will be desolate in very truth for ever." He buried his face in his

hands, and it seemed to Waring as if long sobs convulsed his body.

For a few moments there was complete silence. Evening drew on. Christian Deplan and his friends had taken their departure, certain now that the peace would not be disturbed. Waring turned to the table, and hastily scribbled a letter, producing pen and paper from his pocket for the purpose.

The young Boer looked up before he had finished. "You know now," he said, "why I spoke of you as I did. Like should mate with like, Broer Waring. Boer should marry Boer. You are no husband for Deborah Krillet——"

"I am writing to Vrow Krillet," interposed Waring.

"Are you not returning shortly to the farm?" asked the other. "No letter will reach her more quickly."

"Yes, my friend, it will. You shall deliver it."

"I?"

"Yes, you, Jan van Kerrel." Waring sealed up his letter, addressed it, and handed it to the young man, who took it mechanically, and with a stupid gaze at the Englishman.

"What is this?" he muttered.

"It means," said Waring, "that I am not returning to Vrow Krillet's farm. It means that I am going back to England, where you will have no cause to fear me. I am glad that I met you, Broer van Kerrel. We have perhaps been enabled to serve each other."

The Boer turned the letter over and over in his hand. He was slow to comprehend. "Do you really mean it?" he asked at last. "You—" he stammered in his amazement—"you do not love Vrow Krillet?"

"I cannot marry Vrow Deborah," returned Waring quietly. "I have never had any intention of marrying her. I have never spoken a word of love to her. It is news to me that her relations should have anticipated such an event." He spoke in short, direct sentences, anxious to make himself very clear.

A light shot into the blue eyes of the farmer. "Then I—I may still win her! My life may not yet be empty of its sweetness——"

"I wish you luck from the bottom of my heart," said Waring, extending his hand. The Boer gripped it, and muttered confused words of thanks, and of apology. It was some moments before Waring could get him to listen to his proposals.

"This is what I wish you to do," he said at last. "After we have made the purchases for which I came to the town, you will return with the ox-wagon to Vrow Krillet's farm. You will give her the letter I have written. You will take my place. She needs the assistance of a man—a master over the Kaffirs—for the harvest. Will you do this?"

"I will," cried Van Kerrel eagerly.

And so it was settled. The two men arranged to meet on the following day. The Boer took

his departure, muttering biblical phrases of thanksgiving, and Waring strolled leisurely to the post-office.

Here he despatched two telegrams, the first to the solicitors, the second to Joan Desborough. Business and love, a message for each. The words were alike, though the sentiment was very different.

"I return immediately." That is what he wrote.

And Deborah? His word would reach her, and it would be in the person of Jan van Kerrel.

CHAPTER XXIII

"HE WILL NOT COME"

THE days were very long and weary for Deborah alone in the farm on the veldt. She would wander listlessly about the house or attend to the many duties of the farm in a perfunctory fashion. Her little Kaffir maiden knew the sting of her voice in those days, knew, too, that her eyes were often filled with tears.

Some intuition seemed to have told Deborah that Robert Waring would not return to her. Across the miles of rolling plain the suggestion had come to her mind, and, as the days passed on, it increased almost to a certainty. A telepathy of the veldt exists, perhaps, when messages may be conveyed in no other way, and Deborah had tuned her mind to that of the man she loved.

"He will not come—he will not come." It was with that thought that she awoke, and, rising, threw open the window, from which she could look in the direction of the town beyond the hills. During the day she would reason with herself. Why should he not return? He

loved her, she was sure that he must love her. Had he not written it in his book—that book which had been the cause of so great a crisis in her life? Would a man risk all that he had risked, suffer as he had suffered, for a woman who was indifferent to him? Would he kill? Almost she felt inclined to laugh at her fears.

But at night the parrot cry repeated itself, “He will not come—he will not come.” She would lie awake in her undarkened room, tossing restlessly from side to side, her ears alert for every sound. She would start at the barking of a dog, spring to the window and gaze out into the wonderful clearness of the African night.

But nothing—always nothing.

This state of mind had begun before there was any real probability of Waring’s return—before it was possible even. This she would tell herself when the sun was bright and she was busying herself about the farm. But always at night it was the same.

So the days dragged on their heavy course, and at length the morning dawned, the morning of the day upon which he had said he would, in all probability, return. Deborah dressed herself feverishly. What should she wear? She selected a dress of some soft grey material. It had large pearl buttons down the front. As she was fastening these her fingers twitched nervously. At last, with a smile at the quaint conceit, she deliberately counted the buttons. “He will return—he will not—he will—he will

not—to-day—to-morrow—the day after." She reached the last button upon the words "the day after." With a jerk she tore it off, and tears filled her eyes.

"It is a foolish superstition," she cried to herself, "but I know—I know. What years may hang between this and the day after!"

The little Kaffir maid kept out of her mistress's sight that day. The sun mounted the heavens, and the daily work of the farm proceeded. The Kaffirs jabbered among themselves of the expected return of the master. "Dear Lord! He will be the real master soon," they muttered; "it is good, he does not beat us, he is a fool." But the little maid was silent. She could not understand her mistress's mood.

Evening came on. Deborah stood on the stoep, from which she could obtain the first view of the ox-wagon should it appear. Suddenly she sprang to her feet. She had caught sight of a little cloud of dust in the distance; her trained eyes recognised it for what it was—the ox-wagon with its great team. She placed her hand over her eyes and gazed intently.

The minutes crawled away. Her heart beat painfully.

"It is he!" she murmured.

The outline of the wagon, and the moving figures became evident.

Who was the man who rode on horseback beside the team? A shudder passed through her body. Her eyes hurt her.

She sank down into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

"I knew it," she moaned. "He has not come. He has gone from me. And the 'day after'—God knows when that may be!"

Presently the man who rode by the side of the wagon hurried on, leaving the great team and the shouting Kaffirs to follow at their leisure. In a few moments he had reached the house and was clumsily bowing to Deborah.

She looked up, pale and troubled, and recognised young Jan van Kerrel.

"You, Jan," she cried; "what brings you here?" She did not ask him to dismount.

"I have a letter for you, Deborah," he stammered, conscious of the pain in her face—"a letter that will explain everything." He fumbled in his pocket awkwardly and at last produced Waring's note. "It is from the Englishman," he added, as he handed it down to her.

Deborah took it with trembling fingers and tore it open. Van Kerrel watched her for a moment. "May I off-saddle, Deborah?" he said at last. She had given him no word of welcome, and he felt vaguely hurt. She looked up and nodded. "Yes, yes."

He dismounted, and quietly led his horse to the stable, where he off-saddled and saw to its needs. Then he proceeded to give his instructions to the Kaffirs who were unloading the wagon. Those who had not come with him from

the town crowded up from the kraal and gazed with open-mouthed wonder at this new master. He shouted his orders to them roughly.

Deborah stood alone on the stoep, Robert Waring's letter in her hand. She had read it through twice. It was very brief and almost formal in tone. “You will forgive me if I seem to have broken my promise to you,” so he had written, “but, indeed, it was unavoidable. Do not think I left you with any intention of not returning. I am summoned to England in consequence of the death of two relatives and a very material change in my position.” Here followed some particulars as to his inheritance. In spite of the urgent call from England he would have returned to the farm—so he went on to say—as he fully realised that an overseer was necessary for Deborah—a woman could not attend to everything by herself, especially at this time of harvest—and he would have stayed until she should be able to replace him. But luckily he had fallen in with a friend of hers, a friend who was willing to take his place and give her every assistance, so he was able to return to England with an easy mind. Deborah laughed aloud at this expression. “An easy mind! Of what stuff can such men be made? He has an easy mind, and he writes to me as if there had been nothing between us—nothing!” So she cried in her agony, suffering now as she had not suffered when Simeon Krillet bound her to the tree.

The cold wording of the letter cut her. She did not realise that Waring had written formally because he feared that his correspondence might be tampered with. On his arrival in Durban he had in fact written her another letter worded simply and without restraint, but of this Deborah knew nothing.

"He will return — some day!" Deborah laughed once more. It was with a vague promise that the letter ended. "The day after to-morrow, the morrow that may never dawn!" Her lips set firmly, her eyes were dry. Her hands felt very cold. She heard a footstep approaching and, without looking up, was conscious that Van Kerrel had returned. How she loathed the man! How hateful the world was, and every living thing it contained! Her fingers clenched together; at that moment she would have liked to strike, to hurt, to kill anything that had life. She slowly tore the letter in half lengthways, and then she tore the halves again and again until they were but narrow strips of paper that she held in her hand. And at last she tossed these away over the balustrade of the stoep.

Van Kerrel watched her in silence. There was hope for him surely if this was the way she treated the Englishman's letter. He approached her.

"Deborah!"

She looked up sharply. "Yes?" Had he been more acute of intellect he would have

understood, have read in her face, that she was in no frame of mind to listen to him. But he only realised that she was angry with the Englishman, and that she had torn his letter to shreds. Certainly she could not love him; the dear Lord knew that.

"Deborah, the good Lord has bidden me to return to you. The Lord has been good to me. I prayed to Him that I might win your love, and He sent me to the town where I met the Englishman. You know that I have loved——"

"What do you mean?" Deborah looked at him in amaze. The man bungled on, losing himself in disconnected phrase. She interrupted him at last with an impatient gesture.

"Is it to tell me this that you have come?"

"To tell you that I love you, yes," he cried. He tried to seize her hand, wholly misunderstanding her attitude. "Deborah, will you 'sit up' with me to-night?"

She turned on him fiercely. For a few moments she found no words, but could only point to the stable where he had left his horse. The suggestion of courtship with such a man and at such a time was almost beyond her bearing. "Go—go!" she panted at last; "I do not want you, Jan van Kerrel. Do you understand? I want to be alone. Return to your own farm. Go!"

"But, Deborah——" he faltered.

"Oh, for God's sake, go! Don't you see that I am suffering? I can't talk with you, I

can't explain. You mean well, I know, but that doesn't make it any better. I want to be alone." She repeated the last phrase, and her voice rose to a shrill cry. The desire to be alone was uppermost in her mind. She turned from the man, who stood nervously fumbling with his hat, speechless, and the next moment the door had slammed behind her. She could not have endured for another minute the sight of his foolish, astonished face, she would have broken out into hysterical laughter.

The man remained a while longer where she had left him, uncertain what to do. Then muttering to himself that women were strange creatures, and not even the dear Lord could understand them, he walked slowly towards the stables.

Late that evening Deborah wandered round the farm. The atmosphere inside the house oppressed her; she wanted air. The little Kaffir girl followed her, longing for a word from her silent mistress.

From somewhere near at hand a dog howled. Deborah stood still, and the Kaffir crept to her side. The sound was repeated.

"Take a whip," cried Deborah suddenly, "take a whip and lash the dogs. Let them howl for pain. I want to hurt something to-night; for God's sake break the silence of the lonely farm."

CHAPTER XXIV

JOAN BUYS HER TROUSSEAU

"MAKE the dogs howl," so Deborah Krillet had commanded, and the little Kaffir maid had lashed out furiously at the thin curs who were always prowling about the farm, and one little "brakje," had flung back his head and emitted a weird, melancholy, almost wolfish cry, and his howl had been repeated by the others. Soon a ring of moaning sound encircled the lonely farm, broken by sharp yelps of pain.

Deborah listened to it a moment, then she caught at her throat as though choking, and turned on the maid sharply.

"I was mad!" she cried. "Drop that whip. And you were a fool to obey me. God in heaven! Stop this ghastly howling; it is more than I can bear—more than I can bear!" She wrung her hands wildly. The little Kaffir maid looked at her mistress helplessly, and slunk back against the shelter of the low stone wall.

"When dead men pass," muttered Deborah, "the curs know it and howl; and a dead thing has passed to-night, the ghost of love. But he

will return. Yes." She clasped her hands tightly together. "Robert Waring shall return, if not to find love, to find hate. Did I ask him to love me?" she clenched her little teeth, "or to write of me as he did in his book? Does he treat me as a light woman, to be kissed to-day and deserted to-morrow? I swear by the living God," she raised her white face to the clear cold sky, "that he shall come back." She put her hand to her breast and touched a paper that rustled there. "This is a weapon to my hand—and a snare to his feet." The next second she took her way into the lonely farm, a lonely woman who had touched the two extremes of love and hate.

Six weeks later, Robert Waring, sitting with Joan Desborough in the latter's little boudoir, had almost forgotten the existence of Deborah Krillet in the rapture of meeting his dainty frills-and-flutter girl. Joan herself recalled the Boer woman to his mind.

"I think I ought to be jealous of the Shulamite," she remarked, with a pretty pout and shrug of her shoulders. "Your letters, when you did write, Robert," she laughed coquettishly, "were always full of her. But I'm not a jealous person by nature." She leaned her head back against a pile of cushions and smiled up at her lover with half-closed eyes.

"You jealous!" laughed Waring; "how could you be? You're not the sort of girl, for one thing, and, for another, you know you have no cause, pet."

Yet even as he bent forward and kissed her pretty brown curls, the thought struck him, how would Joan behave if she knew of that scene in the South African field, and had stood by the grave in the burial-ground? He shut his eyes, and the whole picture came up clear before him. He saw Deborah's face, just as he had seen it whilst she was tied to the tree; then he opened them suddenly, and took in every detail of the overcrowded boudoir, crammed as it was with shoals of photographs, odds and ends of china, and chairs of all shapes and sizes.

What a contrast it presented to the parlour of the lonely farm, and what a contrast Deborah was to Joan! It struck him that he should like to see the two women together, and yet how impossible each would seem to the other. Yet both in their own way were beautiful, and both had charm. He wondered what Deborah was doing now. Had she made up her mind to marry that estimable young man, Jan van Kerrel? He suddenly felt a sharp twinge of jealousy. He hoped she would not, though it would be the best thing she could do. How lonely she must be now! He shuddered to himself at the mere thought, remembering the awful loneliness of the farm; and he had deserted her—put it as he would, he had deserted her.

He roused himself with an effort. What was Joan saying? It was a far cry from Deborah Krillet to this pretty, laughing creature, who held a box of chocolates in front of him and

dared him to take the largest. A very far cry indeed, and he had to look up smiling and unconcerned.

"Sweets to the sweet," he laughed, pushing the box back. At that moment Mrs. Denvers entered the room. She had just driven up in her husband's brand-new motor, and she made a great parade of removing her gauze veil and a wonderful cloak. Joan watched her a little enviously. She wanted to be a bride too, and display a bright, gleaming wedding-ring, and announce that she could have the whole world if she wanted it, and that her husband worshipped the ground she trod on.

Perhaps Olive Denvers guessed the current of her sister's thoughts, for the first thing she did was to ask when the marriage would take place.

"Soon, I hope," she said, seating herself in a huge arm-chair, crossing her pretty little feet, and displaying a good deal of frilly petticoat and open-work stocking. "You have really nothing to wait for now. Father will miss Joan, of course; still he will have his club to go to, and he can spend a good part of the year staying with us. Cecil is so fond of Daddy."

Here, as in duty bound, Waring murmured out his affection for Colonel Desborough, which, indeed, was the truth, for he and his prospective father-in-law were good friends.

Mrs. Denvers nodded her head cheerfully and went on. "You will have to redecorate that old family mansion of yours from attic to cellar,

Robert; it's a fine old place, but fearfully in need of repair. Cecil and I ran down to see it on the motor. Then you must take a house or a flat in town. Joan would like a flat best." So Olive Denvers clinched matters in her easy, happy manner. She did it charmingly, yet Robert Waring had a certain uneasy conviction that in future his life would be mapped out and ruled. Small fluffy women like Joan and her sister generally manage their men-folk; they push quietly with their clinging fingers, but in a manner difficult to resist.

"Where shall we go for our honeymoon?" cooed Joan, after the question of the flat had been moved and carried. "Can you think of a nice place, Robert?"

"Monte Carlo," decided Mrs. Denvers; "it's ideal there during the dull English February, and you can show off all your trousseau frocks, Joan, just as I did at Ostend."

"So I can," exclaimed Joan gleefully. "What a help you are, Olive!" and she gave her sister an affectionate little pinch, tweaking the pretty pink ear. "Let's decide on Monte Carlo, please, Robert," she added, turning to the bridegroom elect. "We ought to have a lovely time there."

"Cecil and I might join you," Olive Denvers went on; "you won't want more than a week to yourselves. It isn't smart to have a secluded honeymoon nowadays. Yes, we'll come out and join you." She spoke with decision, as if the subject was settled.

Robert Waring felt vaguely irritated. He disliked of all things to be overruled and have his plans arranged for him. Yet the two sisters looked so happy, and made such a pretty picture, that he did not like to risk annoying them by suggesting a different place for the honeymoon, much as he objected to taking Joan to Monte Carlo, a place where she would be claimed all day by friends and acquaintances, and where he would rub shoulders with half the men he knew.

He got up from his chair and strolled over to the fireplace, lighting his cigarette from a glowing coal; he stood and looked down into the fire, seeing fantastic pictures.

Vaguely, and as one in a dream, he heard the chatter of Joan and Mrs. Denvers. They were discussing the vexed question of the trousseau. Once or twice his opinion was appealed to on the rival merits of satin or *crêpe de chine* for the wedding dress, and whether the Court train should be of lace or brocade; but little notice was taken of his answers or his refusal to meddle in sartorial matters.

He caught scraps of the conversation. Were the bridesmaids to wear pink or mauve? Should Joan go away in white cloth or dark blue velvet? Had Olive better have an ermine or chinchilla stole? He grew oppressed at last by the overpowering femininity of the atmosphere, and felt half stifled by clouds of chiffon, yards of ribbon, and filmy meshes of lace. Had he strayed into

a milliner's shop he could not have been more overwhelmed or more irritated.

He stood it for a moment or two longer, wondering when Mrs. Denvers would take her departure and Joan forget the great question of clothes; but they went on talking cheerfully and discussing the merits of hats.

"I'm off to the club, Joan," he said at last. He had intended to take the girl to Prince's for lunch, and then had planned a visit to some Bond Street picture-gallery, but Mrs. Denvers's advent had knocked all this on the head.

"Must you go, darling?" pouted Joan, but before her lover had reached the door she was once more deep in talk with her sister; and though she waved her hand prettily and called out that he must return and dine that evening, Waring got the impression that both women were glad of his temporary absence.

He bit his lips a little as he got into a hansom and ordered the cabman to drive to the club. The man who had been all in all to Deborah Krillet held a different position to Joan Desborough, and Waring could not help seeing this.

Deborah would have found her happiness only by his side, and he would have possessed her, body and soul. She would have given him every thought and emotion and been miserable away from him. He knew that; he knew it for a fact—but Joan? The man shrugged his shoulders. Joan was dear and delightful and pretty, but her limitation was the limitation of a bandbox,

and she was as happy chattering with her sister as listening to his protestations of love.

Well, he liked her so—he preferred it. Far better to marry a charming, easy-tempered doll than a woman who could clothe a dead man for the grave and watch the planing of a coffin lid with cold, dry eyes. Better to listen to a pretty babble about frocks and frills than to hear the fierce cry of a passionate woman, who could say of her dead husband, “I would not lift my little finger to save him from the worm and the pit.”

Yet—and here an odd thought came into Robert Waring’s brain and a strange gleam into his eyes. If he had met the Shulamite before her heart had been hardened and her soul soured?

Suppose, like the wise king of old, he had come upon her fresh and fragrant, walking at even in the garden of spices, coming up with rosy feet from the vineyard? A man might do worse than walk in the garden of love with the Shulamite.

All at once Joan Desborough, with her smiles and her fripperies, her light laughter and flutters, her dainty affectations, her studied idleness and her complacent selfishness, vanished from Waring’s mind, and a different vision entered.

He was in a garden. Now the north wind blew straight and cool, and now the south wind diffused fragrance. An orchard of pomegranates made pleasant shade, and sweet and strong the odour of the trees of frankincense, myrrh, and aloes; and who came down the garden, flying

eager-footed—a shining priestess of love? Who but the Shulamite herself?

Robert Waring clenched his hands fiercely. Why should he think of Deborah Krillet when the next month would see him married to Joan Desborough?

CHAPTER XXV

JAN VAN KERREL OFF-SADDLES

"HE cometh not." Like Mariana in the Moated Grange, Deborah Krillet repeated the three words wearily, unconscious that a poet had immortalised them and made them express all the dreary languor of a life spent in waiting.

Instead of the drip of rain and moan of wind, shadow of poplar and creak of hinge, Deborah was alone with loneliness, and so suffered more than Mariana.

Day after day this Boer woman of the veldt looked out on a wave of speckless brown grass, or up into the harsh blue of the cloudless sky, and night after night she gazed at a bare, black plain.

Sometimes she could have shrieked aloud because of the cold, terrible silence. At other moments her tears would fall slowly, salt drops of bitter despair. Once or twice she had felt certain she would see Waring ere nightfall. Her heart whispered it to her brain. Then she would go and prepare his room for him, making the

bed herself, pressing her lips feverishly to the coarse white sheets, her fingers tremulous, her cheeks flushing, her eyes glittering with wild hope.

The hours she had spent waiting on the stoep, leaning back heartsick and weary in her rocking-chair, or sitting up tense and vigilant, every nerve on the rack, every sense strained! Always to no purpose—he never came! What good to shade her eyes at noon and gaze across the veldt, or to strain them at twilight? The monotony of the picture never changed. Robert Waring never came to colour it.

The Kaffirs used to laugh in the shelter of their kraal, and bless the Lord for the Ou Noi's foolishness. For she was a fool, that white woman, sick of love for the Rooi-nek who had deserted her, a woman who spared the whip. It was good to be at the lonely farm now. No questions were asked when the apricot trees were plundered or the mealies stolen. It was no sin to be caught eating a handful of dried meebos. But the little Kaffir maid never laughed. She followed her mistress like a faithful dog, and watched her with pitiful eyes.

"Why do you stare at me so?" Deborah had once asked her passionately, then had gone on her way unheeding the answer, callous to the love poured out at her feet, blind to the whole world of living things.

Now on a hot, heavy morning, Deborah sat in the stiff parlour engaged on some sewing. Her face looked very pale, and she drew the needle

through the cloth wearily. She hated everything—the dreary room, the straight, hard chairs, the white seam, and most of all the intense stillness. Suddenly her quick ears caught the sound of a horse's hoofs. Someone was coming! Who?

She had been disappointed so often that this time she determined to sit still and wait. What was the good of a wild run to the stoep, to be confronted with a Kaffir boy leading a horse, or possibly one of her dead husband's brothers, who had come over to see what fared at the farm? No, she would wait. If Waring had returned, it would only protract the joy of their meeting for a few seconds; and if it was not himself, there was no one for whom she cared to cross the floor.

The little Kaffir maiden ran in, her black eyes shining and glistening, her large mouth open. She started a little as she caught sight of her mistress. Deborah was leaning forward in her chair, her arms clasped tightly round her knees, her face strained and expectant. When the Kaffir girl entered she rose to her feet with a shriek of passionate joy.

"He has come," she cried. "Robert Waring has returned?"

The girl shook her head and plucked nervously at her ragged cotton skirt.

"It is not the Englishman," she muttered, for she feared the flash of Deborah's wrath, "it is Jan van Kerrel;" then she added hastily,

"but he brings news of the Englishman, ja, he told me so himself."

"He brings news." Deborah repeated the words to herself, then hurried to the stoep. Jan van Kerrel was standing by his horse when she came up to him, patting the tired brute on his flank. The young man flushed red as he saw Deborah approaching, and his light, sleepy blue eyes shone with sudden fire. He shook hands nervously, and was obviously ill at ease.

"Won't you off-saddle, Jan?" she asked quietly, though her whole being was consumed with anxiety to know what news he had brought—the news she had not enough courage to question him about.

"May I, Deborah?" He asked the question simply, his eyes searching her face. She nodded her head in answer; she could not trust herself to speak.

She began to count aloud to fill up the terrible seconds before the young Boer came back from the stables, and nearly cried with impatience at last. Yet when he did come she got a sudden impression that he brought bad news, and she dreaded the moment when he would begin to speak. She commenced to talk herself, speaking in a quick, hurried voice, utterly unlike her own. She asked a thousand questions about the harvest. Had Tant Annie's sheep really got the scab? What a good soap-pot Vrow Junker had; but she was always a good housewife, wasn't she?

Van Kerrel listened stolidly to this flow of conversation. It was utterly unlike Deborah to talk so rapidly and restlessly, or to betray so much interest in her neighbours, but he, on his part, was in no hurry to break the news he had travelled over sixty miles to tell. There was no knowing how Deborah would take it, whether to his good or to his hurt. Meanwhile, he was content to be with her, to gaze at the pale face which represented all the beauty in the world to him; to listen to the clear voice, and to curse all Rooi-neks in his heart, and one above the rest.

The news of Jan van Kerrel's advent had spread, and the Kaffirs were chatting about it already, squatting on the ground like apes. They had no wish that Deborah should marry the young Boer; it would mean hard work and scant pay again, and the flick of the sjambok on brown flesh. The dear Lord send that he trekked homewards, and left the farm on the plain to its peace!

Meanwhile Deborah and her guest sat drinking coffee in the little parlour. Van Kerrel was attempting to eat a roaster cake. The food seemed to choke him; he wanted to speak and yet he feared to. Meanwhile the clock on the mantelpiece ticked on mechanically, as though indifferent to all human joys and fears.

At last the woman felt she could bear the suspense and uncertainty no longer. She had

caught up a piece of knitting and was moving the needles in furious haste, and she promised herself she would ask Jan van Kerrel his news as soon as she came to the end of her row. But before the last stitch the young man had cleared his throat huskily and approached the subject himself.

"Have you heard from him?" he asked suddenly; "you know whom I mean, the Englishman!"

Deborah flushed crimson. Robert Waring had been away three months. Surely she must seem as a woman deserted by her lover, and against this position her pride rebelled. She bent her head low over her knitting, and the pins clicked sharply together. Then she looked up straight into Jan van Kerrel's eyes.

"I have not heard from the Englishman," she said slowly, "but I shall."

"Will you?" he answered quietly, a great pity for the woman coming over him, and for the pain and humiliation she would have to suffer. "Deborah Krillet, I doubt it." He put his coffee-cup down carefully and wiped his mouth with a large yellow silk handkerchief. The homely simplicity of the action only enhanced the tragedy that was being enacted.

"Doubt it, then!" cried Deborah. She rose to her feet and looked at the Boer farmer scornfully, and her attitude was that of a woman at bay. "What does the return of

Robert Waring mean to you?" she went on defiantly, "and what have you come here to spy? If you want to turn me against him"—her voice rose shrill, she was on the verge of an hysterical breakdown—"you will never succeed! Never! Never!" She stamped her foot on the floor. "By the dear Lord who made us and all breathing flesh, Robert Waring will return to me."

"You think so?" She had stung him bitterly, and he felt a passionate resentment, a dull, heavy sense of wrong. So let him pain her as she had pained him; he drew his breath hard and short. "I have a paper to show you," he said coldly: "you may change your mind about the possibility of the Rooi-nek's return after you have read it."

"Show it me!" she panted as she spoke and her breast heaved. She could not grow paler, but blue lines began to creep round her mouth; a tress of her red-gold hair had come uncoiled, and fell like a streak of flame across her shoulders, her hands and feet got icy cold, and nervous shivers shot down her spine. A few more seconds of such agonised suspense and she felt she would die; she must die. Her eyes watched every movement of Van Kerrel's; his slowness tortured her almost beyond bearing. She caught at her knitting and tore it off the pins, unravelling the work of days with fierce energy. She had to tear at something—to tear and rend!

Meanwhile the young Boer searched pocket after pocket, till he had found what he sought—a worn leather pocket-book fastened with a thick elastic band. He turned over the leaves with coarse, clumsy fingers till he came across a newspaper cutting. It was a cutting from an English newspaper, now a month old, and Jan van Kerrel had come upon the paper by mere accident—one of those accidents which hinge destiny.

It gave an account of a fashionable wedding in a fashionable London church, described the bride's dress and train, the number of bridesmaids, the long list of presents; but none of this concerned Van Kerrel, only the great, the damning fact that the bride was called Joan Desborough and the bridegroom Robert Waring.

He said nothing, only handed the cutting to Deborah. Let her read for herself that the man she loved had taken to himself a wife, and rejoiced, even now, a bridegroom!

CHAPTER XXVI

A WOMAN SCORNE

DEBORAH KRILLET could not read the cutting for a second; the print danced in front of her eyes, and everything seemed to get black and misty; then the mist cleared as suddenly as it had come, and she read what she had to read.

She took the blow standing. No scream passed the scarlet lips; she uttered neither exclamation nor moan, but stood up silent and rigid, her fingers clenched tightly on the scrap of paper, her head a little thrown back.

Jan van Kerrel glanced at her nervously. He wished she would speak—the tragic silence was beginning to get on his nerves—and why couldn't she move? Dear Lord! she was like no breathing human creature; she might have passed for a statue of stone or a frozen woman of snow. He remembered a woodcut engraving of Lot's wife; Deborah was not unlike that stiff, motionless figure.

The clock ticked on steadily, a dog barked in the Kaffir kraal, and a Kaffir woman laughed

from somewhere outside, and her shrill laugh jarred on Van Kerrel horribly. This was no hour for mirth. Deborah was in sore travail of soul, and he would like the whole world to sorrow with her.

Love was refining Jan van Kerrel and exalting rough passion into something better. He forgot his own heartache looking at Deborah, and he cursed his own helplessness to be of real comfort during her hour of shame and agony. At last he could bear her silence no longer.

"Deborah," he said gently, "did I not speak the truth? He is false; he will not return."

"Be quiet," she cried fiercely, "be quiet! In God's name leave me alone for a few moments. The world is rocking under my feet, and I am gazing into the mouth of hell!"

The Boer looked at her open-mouthed and dazed. Did she or did she not realise what she was saying? This was not woman talk at all; it was bad talk—mad.

"Are you going to leave me alone?" cried Deborah, seeing that he made no effort to go. "Take yourself from the room! Don't stare at me like that! Do you expect me to drop dead at your feet, or to shriek as Tant Annie did when her husband died?" She was speaking in shrill tones and wringing her hands together, but her eyes were glittering and tearless. "Oh! by the God who made us, leave me alone!"

Much as Van Kerrel wanted to stay, he dared

not resist the fierce and agonised appeal, so he slouched heavily from the room. A moment later Deborah heard the crunch of his boots as he paced moodily up and down the stoep.

She drew a deep breath of relief, for his presence had been intolerable; then threw herself suddenly on her knees. She clutched at the back of one of the stiff wooden chairs and swayed backwards and forwards with it, straining it to her breast; straining so fiercely that she bruised her flesh; yet still clutched tighter.

"Married!" she muttered to herself hoarsely; "married!" Then she began to laugh softly, but there was something terrible in such hollow mirth; it contained more agony than could have been expressed by tears. "Joan Desborough, the bride, looked lovely." She repeated the words with sharp, staccato intonation. "White satin and Court train of lace. He gave her rubies. God, God! Why must I suffer so? It isn't just, it isn't fair!" She sprang to her feet, hurling the chair from her, and stood up with extended arms. "Hasn't every living soul a right to some small share of happiness?" she cried defiantly. "But I have been forgotten in the allotment. All things evil have been my share, and nothing good. The bread of affliction and the waters of strife—that has been my food and drink, and it is unjust, unmerciful."

She paced up and down the room even as Jan van Kerrel paced the stoep outside. Her little teeth bit fiercely into her underlip, and she took

quick, eager footsteps, like those of a wild thing caged.

"He is with her now; she is his bride—his wife. She sleeps in his arms; she wakes to his kiss; she will bear him children, and be loved again in them; and I am here alone and deserted."

The words came rapidly. "But he loved me. Oh yes! he loved me. Did he not slay a man for my sake, and write of me as the Shulamite in his book?" She was arguing to herself, clutching feverishly at the last anchor hope had left behind.

She glanced at the scrap of torn print again, as though every word had not burnt itself on her brain, and as she read her face became livid. She caught at her throat to try and press back a lump that had begun to rise and choke her. Van Kerrel entered to find her in that attitude. Her look and pose frightened him; he feared for her reason.

"Let the tears come, Deborah," he counselled gently, a wonderful tenderness coming into his rough voice. "Didn't I see my sister when her first baby died, and wasn't her wound more sore than yours? 'Bathe it with tears!' so my mother said to her. 'Tears make the best ointment.' When they got my sister to cry the pain grew better."

"What is Tranje's sorrow to my sorrow?" interrupted Deborah, with a burst of wild passion. "Tranje will meet her little dead baby when the

graves give up their dead, and no other woman will be able to strain it to her, and cry out the child is hers. But with myself," she paused a second, and seemed to be looking far ahead, "the case is different. She holds him now, and she'll hold him to the end of time, this Joan Desborough. She has snared him from me, and she'll keep him. She is the vine in the garden, and I—I am the wild vine in the wilderness, and my grapes are sour grapes." The woman spoke with irresistible bitterness, reckless how utterly she bared her soul, her love making her shameless.

Jan van Kerrel glanced at her helplessly. He was suffering too, but he realised that Deborah was callous to his pain, and he supposed it was natural that she should be. He wanted to help her. She looked such a little, pitiful creature, yet with all his strength of limb and sinew he was utterly powerless to lift the burden that was crushing her to the dust, though he ventured at it clumsily.

"You will forget him, Deborah. He is dead to you."

"But he is alive to her," she retorted. "Is there no agony in that thought, Jan van Kerrel? Wouldn't I rather see him dead and cold at my feet than know he is whispering to her as he once whispered to me? Ah!" She caught her breath and went on in intense tones. "Wouldn't it be better when I lie awake at nights to know that the grass waves over his grave, than to

picture him sitting by another woman's side? She holding his hand in hers, or stroking back his hair, that rich brown hair which grows so thick." Deborah was speaking now with an odd, pitiful wistfulness that contrasted strangely with her former wild mood. "I often wanted to stroke it back myself," she went on, "and now—now." She broke down, uttering a sharp, wild cry, turning her face aside so that Jan should not see the agony that distorted it.

Deeply moved, he clenched his fist and brought it down heavily on the round, old-fashioned, wooden table, scraping the skin off his knuckles.

"Curse the man," he cried passionately, "for he has made you suffer! Curse him and every Rooi-nek of the lot. We don't want them here, we hate them as they hate us. The dear Lord send the rot to their bones and sickness to their houses. May their wives prove barren, and their sheep die of the scab. Let them go down to the pit. Cursed be Robert Waring, I say, let him be accursed."

"Curse her—not him," interposed Deborah, dashing the tears from her eyes and facing the flushed Boer, "for she has lured him from me with her cunning speech and her woman's wiles. She dresses in silks and satins, she walks daintily, she hangs herself about with jewels, and so she has caught him in her net; she has snared him with a snare. But he will break the silken cords when he hears me calling him, for my beloved

is mine and I am his." As she spoke Deborah was magnificent; passion raised her above herself. She was no longer a deserted woman, she was a priestess of desire, a Circe of the plains.

"Deborah—have you forgotten?" began Jan van Kerrel in nervous tones, gazing at her perplexed and astounded. "He has married the woman. She is his wife."

"His wife!" Deborah laughed defiantly. "Were she twenty times his wife he would still be mine, and I tell you, Jan van Kerrel, I will call him from her, and he will come; yes, he will come." She raised her little clenched hand. "One day you will ride up to find him here."

"It would be sin," replied the Boer stolidly. "Would you tempt the dear Lord, Deborah?"

"The dear Lord!" repeated Deborah. She had flung herself back in the large arm-chair and now looked up at the man defiantly. He noticed the red spot that burnt each cheek, the curious glitter of her eyes, and the restless way she tapped the floor with her shoe. "Why should I fear to tempt God?" she went on. "He has shown me small kindness, and I can suffer no more than I have suffered. As for eternal punishment," she smiled, showing her sharp white teeth, "I shall be dead then; played out, above feeling pain; but whilst I am young, living, and strong," she flung her arms up passionately, "I want to be happy! I am quite prepared to pay the full price for such happiness; understand me on that point, Jan; but I want

a good deep drink of it. And now, Jan van Kerrel, hadn't we better say good-bye?" She half rose from her chair. "You are a good fellow, Jan," she said softly, "so the best thing I can wish you is to forget me."

"To forget you, Deborah?" He stood in front, looking down at her sternly. "I wish I could! Why is it," he asked vaguely, "that it is so easy to forget a good, well-meaning woman, a woman who does her duty, rears children, and looks after the household, whilst a little creature like you—you still look nothing but a girl, Deborah—can draw me here as with a cord. And now I am to say good-bye!" His voice hardened. "I can offer you a man's love, a good home. You turn from both. Are you mad? Has this Englishman bewitched you?"

"Perhaps he has," she said slowly, "but I know one thing. No other man will ever kiss my lips; no other man will ever stir my heart. For good or ill, our paths have crossed; for weal or woe, our lives have twined. Robert Waring loves me, and I love Robert Waring. This marriage," she snapped her fingers fiercely, "what does it mean to me? Nothing, and less than nothing! See you, I shall not always be the woman deserted; one day I shall be the woman found."

"It is sin," he answered in a dull voice. "You know it is sin."

"Oh, Jan van Kerrel," she replied mockingly, "if it is sin, it is a pleasant sin; besides, this

love of mine has become part of me and absorbed me body and soul. You do not know, you cannot understand, but I tell you my body has become a temple, and for me there is no God but one."

"Deborah, what do you mean?" cried the man in tones of shocked horror, his puritanical upbringing having ill prepared him for such a scene or speech.

"What do I mean?" came her shrill, half-hysterical reply. "Oh, friend Jan, if you loved as I do you would guess."

The next second she had run out of the room, a flashing, flying figure. He heard her wild laughter as she tore up the stairs, but he guessed, and rightly, that tears were streaming down her face.

"She will be sorry for all this later on," he said slowly. "Ja, ja! she will be sorry. She does not know what she said. Now she will cry and forget all this foolishness. The dear Lord, I know women."

Possibly Jan van Kerrel knew women, but that was not saying he understood Deborah.

CHAPTER XXVII

DEBORAH WRITES A LETTER

ALL night long Deborah Krillet had tossed restlessly from side to side of her bed, and sleep had only come to her in fitful snatches. She fell asleep to dream of Waring, uneasy, troubled dreams, and to wake with a feverish sense that something had gone wrong—only she couldn't quite tell what.

Then as the full knowledge of what had happened came back, she would cower trembling amongst the blankets, letting her tears moisten the pillow and trickle down the open neck of her nightgown.

The dawn came in, and with the dawn sleep vanished, so Deborah sat up in bed, her knees drawn to her chin, her arms folded tightly round. Her red hair streamed down her back, and her face was as colourless as the sheets, yet she was still beautiful—in the fashion of a passion-pale Francesca da Rimini or a deserted nymph.

The wild fury that had buoyed her up during her scene with Jan van Kerrel had exhausted itself, being consumed by its own fuel, and

now she was feeling the sickness of despair. Her confidence in herself had deserted her. She had been mad to think she could allure Robert Waring from his wife—this beautiful young Englishwoman, the woman who had fared delicately all her days. Deborah clenched her teeth as she remembered the fashion paper's eulogy over Joan's dainty loveliness and the description of her trousseau fineries. How could she combat such a rival? A woman clothed in silk from chemise to petticoat, a perfumed, smiling creature. Why, even her little slippers were of velvet, and didn't the paper say that her very dressing-gowns and morning wrappers were poetic dreams of chiffon and lace?

Deborah sprang out of bed; she ran to her huge, bare toilet-table and looked at herself in the looking-glass. She took in the effect of the coarse, hard white nightgown, unrelieved by ribbon, embroidery, or lace, but had no eyes for the weird beauty of her small white face.

Suddenly she loosened the ugly gown and allowed it to slip beneath the line of her shoulders; then she shook out her hair, and a veil of red flame fell about her neck and face. Then she glanced again at the mirror, this time half defiantly.

A slow smile curved her scarlet mouth as she realised the beauty of her dimpled shoulders, the perfect curves of her form, and the rippling glory of her hair. Let Joan Desborough have her silks and her laces, her jewels and her

perfumes, Deborah Krillet had a certain dimple on the left shoulder that should stand her in better stead when it came to the day of battle, and two women fought together for one man.

But how to ensure Waring's return? How to summon him from Joan? Deborah flung herself on her bed pondering, biting her little finger-tips with her sharp, gleaming teeth.

She heard the barking of the dogs, sounds of chatter from the Kaffir kraal, the gradual waking of the farm to life, yet she still lay motionless on her bed, save for that steady gnawing of the finger.

The little Kaffir maid came into her room with a cup of hot, steaming coffee. She pulled up the blinds, and let a flood of sunshine in, then started as she perceived the half-draped figure of Deborah stretched outside the bed, her eyes closed as if asleep.

Could the vrow be ill? The girl touched her mistress cautiously. Deborah opened her eyes and caught at the Kaffir's thin brown arm. After all she was a bit of living flesh, even though a soulless Kaffir, and she had served Deborah well. Perhaps her advice would be useful now.

"He is married," she whispered in low tones; "he has betrayed me, but I want him all the same. Only he will never return."

A cunning expression shot over the Kaffir, and her big lips protruded in a fearful smile.

"Ou Noi must write to the Englishman," she

said slowly, "she must tell him to come back. The dear Lord knows he would come. Ja, he would have to."

"You little fool," retorted Deborah sharply, "why should he? He has left me for her. Do you think she—this English wife—won't keep him to her side? Besides, he will not want to leave her."

"Didn't the Englishman kill the Baas?" asked the Kaffir, a sinister look in her eyes. "So what is to prevent Vrow Deborah denouncing him for murder? Wouldn't he have to come back then? Frighten him with the rope, vrow! Hasn't he cut your very heart into ribbons and made you as white as a laid-out corpse? Why should you spare him? It's better to have one's lover dead than clasped to the breast of another woman." The girl spoke with savage ferocity, and went on fiercely. "Don't we know that the dear Lord hates Englishmen? Hasn't He given them an ugly land to dwell in, with a sky yellow as brimstone overhead? What does Vrow Deborah want with one of the breed? They are all devil's spawn."

"Be quiet!" cried Deborah. "Another word and I'll have you whipped till you howl. Who are you to dare speak of the Englishman? You—soulless as a cur. But you are right in one thing—he killed Simeon Krillet. How would she like to know that, this Englishwoman? She might push him from her if she learnt the truth. 'Your hands are red,' she would cry, for these

Englishwomen are poor squeamish creatures, and he would hang his head, for her words would be true words."

She rose from the bed as she spoke and commenced to dress hurriedly, her eyes gleaming with excitement, colour flushing her cheeks.

Jan van Kerrel was fairly startled when he came upon her an hour later. Where had she hidden the emotion of the previous evening, those blinding tears and passionate sighs? She was now smiling and self-possessed, her hair arranged becomingly, her manner cheerful to the point of exhilaration. He observed to himself that women are curious creatures as he advanced and held out his hand in greeting.

"What a fine day!" he remarked lamely. "Did you sleep well?"

Deborah looked up sharply, and her forehead twisted into a frown. Was she going to tell Jan she had passed a night of agony? He had small consideration to ask such a question. She waved it aside.

"Jan," she said quietly, "I want you to ride back to the town and post a letter for me; will you do this?"

The man made no answer for a second, only glanced at her steadily. He looked what he was—dull, homely, and true. A good man, yet the woman would have none of him; even now her eyes were contemptuous.

In his way Jan van Kerrel felt the tragedy of his own wasted love every whit as much as

Deborah did hers; but whilst she rebelled against fate, and tried to roll back the wheel of destiny, he yielded with a certain dignity to what it had pleased God to ordain.

"You have written to him?" he said very slowly, holding out his hand for the letter; "you prefer to play the wanton than to be my wife! Is it well, Deborah Krillet; is it well?"

She flushed a deep, burning red, and her eyes shot fire.

"Who made you my judge, Jan? You prefer treasure in heaven to happiness in this world, perhaps? I don't!" She spoke with sharp decision. "All I want in this life is Robert Waring, and that letter will bring him back to me; and afterwards—in the great eternity—if He who made the skies and gave life to all breathing things chooses to condemn me to eternal punishment because I seized my own happiness, I shall accept my doom, accept it quite cheerfully, for I shall have had what I wanted." She shut her lips firmly and threw back the little proud head.

Jan van Kerrel turned and walked slowly to the door; he paused before he turned the handle, and said in low tones, "If I go now, I go for ever, Deborah; you know that?"

"I know it, Jan, and—I wish you to go."

A little later Deborah heard his horse being brought round, and as she listened to the stir of departure, a faint feeling of compunction worked at her heart. After all, the man loved her well

after his own fashion, and if she had never met Robert Waring, she might have looked on him with eyes of favour, but as it was——

She strained her ears to listen to the sound of the departing horsehoofs. After a moment the sounds got fainter, and soon there was nothing to hear at all, bend her head forward as she might.

The silence of the plain had swallowed up Jan van Kerrel ; he had ridden out of Deborah's life.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE END OF THE HONEYMOON

"WE had a perfectly delicious honeymoon!" Joan Waring yawned a little as she put down her pen for a moment, and stretched herself lazily. She was writing to one of her bridesmaids and her favourite friend, and had been giving a glowing account of the month spent at Monte Carlo. Everything, according to Joan, had been "duddy," and Robert a most delightful and attentive husband.

She had enjoyed it all—the pleasant excursions, the wild mountain walks, play at the Casino, strolls on the terrace, drives in the Baron de Conti's motor, lunches and dinners to which the newly-married pair had been bidden, and perhaps most of all, wearing her trousseau frocks and hats, and coming out forcibly as an all-conquering bride.

She liked to think she was married. Miss Joan Desborough had been one of Society's spoilt toys; but Mrs. Robert Waring intended to be a social queen—that is, if it would not be too much trouble. Joan held up her left

hand and looked meditatively at her wedding-ring. She only caught a gleam of its gold circle, for a half-hoop of rubies nearly swallowed it up, and above the rubies a flashing of brilliants bore tribute to the generosity of the bridegroom; but the gleam of gold was enough to make her realise her wifehood.

"It is nice to be married," the girl smiled to herself, "at least, married as I am to a man who can give me all I want, for poverty would be horrid." She glanced round the pretty drawing-room of the Sloane Street flat. Olive Denvers had been right when she insisted that the walls should be hung with pale blue brocade, and the furniture be pure Empire. It was a distinctly charming room, and it made a fitting background for Joan.

She looked like one of the smiling Watteau shepherdesses on the mantelpiece as she sat at her dainty little writing-table, a pink-and-white doll obviously designed for ornament. It was almost impossible to associate her with any sort of toil and hardship, and she would have laughed at the idea herself. Marriage had given her a shade more importance in manner, a little assertion of independence, and a delightful self-complacency, otherwise it had left her the mere spoilt child it had found her.

The door opened and Robert Waring entered. He looked a little older and a little bored. The fact of being envied and extolled as the luckiest

man on earth had begun to annoy him horribly. He was sick of being congratulated, weary of the town.

His glance softened as Joan turned and smiled at him. He was honestly fond of his pretty wife—somewhat in the fashion of the Grand Turk; but then it contented Joan to be hung with jewels and fed with sweetmeats.

“Let’s get away, pet,” he said, bending over her chair and brushing the brown waves on her forehead with his lips. Joan fidgeted a little under the caress. She was afraid he was disarranging her fringe-net. “I’m bored with London, and would like to run down to the Towers, so let’s shut up the flat and be off next week.”

He spoke with some conviction. He was anxious to take up the rôle of landowner and control of his estate. An idle life palled. His was a brain too restless for the limitations of club-land and Bond Street.

Joan pouted. She had no wish to retire to Cheshire and the family mansion. Quite time for that when partridges had to be shot, and the house could be filled with a lively shooting party.

“Oh, we can’t possibly leave London, darling,” she exclaimed, in her pretty, coaxing way. “I’ve made a whole heap of engagements. Besides, we shall soon be in May, and I want my season.”

“And I want to get into the country.” There

was a shade of annoyance in the man's voice and he ceased to kiss the soft brown hair.

"Cecil always does just what Olive wishes," retorted Joan, "though their honeymoon has been over for ages."

Robert Waring shrugged his shoulders. So it pleased Joan to compare him to weak-kneed, weak-willed Cecil Denvers! His brain conjured up a flashing vision of his thin, fair-haired brother-in-law, and he felt grateful to his wife for the compliment.

"Cecil and I are rather different individuals," he remarked quietly. "I've nothing to say against your sister, Joan. I think her a charming little woman, but, all the same, I shouldn't like you to decide everything for me as she does for her husband. A man has a will of his own, you know; besides, didn't you swear to obey me in all things?" He laughed as he spoke, and pinched her plump, dimpled arm, but she shook his hand off rather pettishly.

"What's the good of referring to that stupid service, Robert? I'm sure I don't know what I said—it was all such a dream; but no man on earth expects his wife to obey him nowadays—the idea has gone out like crinolines." Joan flushed up pink and began toying with her pen; she was annoyed, and showed it.

"What day shall we go?" Waring spoke with decision; he must assert himself now or

never, prove master in his own house. Yet he felt like a mastiff bullying a kitten.

"I'm not going." Joan turned with a provoking smile. "I just can't, darling! I'm as full of engagements as ever I can be." She waved a dainty engagement-book in front of him. "Look at the book with your own eyes, Robert, if you doubt my word! Of course, if you really want to go to Cheshire, you might run down by yourself for a week or so. Shall I give the bad boy a holiday?" She never doubted he would give an indignant refusal, but as his wife spoke Robert Waring realised the deep gulf between them. Never as long as she lived would this Joan of frills and flutters leave her own path to follow him, and he must make up his mind not to expect it. She loved him as well as she could love anyone, and he must be content with that. Modern women have developed selfishness to a fine art, and Joan was modern to her finger-tips. He shrugged his shoulders and accepted the situation.

"As you like, *ma belle* : if you don't grant the holiday I'm afraid I shall take it." He paused and looked at her gravely. "I in Cheshire next week, and you in town : I'm afraid that means that our honeymoon is over."

Before Joan could reply, the door opened and the butler entered. He carried a pile of letters on a silver salver. Joan pounced on hers with a little cry of pleasure ; she loved opening invita-

tions or receiving notes about nothing from her friends; also, she had not taken Robert's speech seriously.

He took up the couple of envelopes the post had brought him; then started a little as his eyes fell on one which had been redirected from the Towers. He recognised the strong, clear handwriting, also the South African stamp.

So Deborah Krillet had written to him! Did she know he was married? He glanced round at Joan, but she was absorbed in her correspondence. He took his way to the small smoking-room. Somehow he felt he would rather read his letter alone. The cry of a lonely woman from a lonely farm!

He thought of Deborah with some tenderness as he opened the envelope. She had loved him, not in the milk-and-water fashion of Joan, but as the women of the past loved, with passionate unselfishness and wild devotion. Splendid Shulamite! She had paid for that love in tears.

As his eyes ran down the first page of her letter he caught his breath and uttered a short cry, for Deborah of the veldt had written a line that made Robert Waring realise that a woman's hate can outstrip a woman's love.

"Come back to me as you swore you would, or I will denounce you to the world as Simeon Krillet's murderer," she had written, "and the first person who learns the truth shall be your wife."

Robert Waring whistled, then swore by all his gods!

CHAPTER XXIX

"WHAT WOULD JOAN SAY?"

"THE first person who learns the truth shall be your wife." Robert Waring repeated the words to himself slowly. Deborah Krillet had written them, and she was a woman who would keep her word; he knew that. But Joan—what would Joan say?

Poor, pretty, dainty Joan! The girl who cried over dead birds, and could not endure the thought of drowned kittens. Joan, who had screamed when he once cut his finger, and who always turned faint at the sight of blood!

She might do more than scream and turn faint when she heard the full details of the South African tragedy, how Simeon Krillet had been shot through the heart in full glare of sunshine, and buried by the light of the cold African moon.

What would Joan say? Possibly a good deal.

He read the letter through again, biting his lip over some of the long, nervous sentences, penned by a woman obviously half wild with rage. How utterly Deborah Krillet must have

misunderstood him before she could write, "Why did you do your best to make me love you? How could you wake the woman in me, and arouse love to kill it?" Or again, on the next page, "If you had never cared it would be different, but love once given cannot be plucked back at will."

He had never loved her! So he said to himself as he strode up and down the tiny smoking-den, hung about with Eastern curtains, decorated by Liberty. She had interested and appealed to him; he had been very sorry for her; he had admired her; but as for loving Deborah Krillet—the idea was absurd!

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently as he reflected how difficult it might be to prove this to Joan—how difficult, indeed, to prove it to the world!

It is not always easy to convince your fellows that you have treated a beautiful woman as a mere psychological study, and taken no warmer interest in her. Also, the fact that Simeon Krillet had been impelled by jealousy to act as he did would put an unfavourable complexion upon things and bear out Deborah's story.

All this and more passed through Waring's brain as he paced the room. He said to himself a hundred times that he was indignant with Deborah, and that her letter passed all bounds, and yet at the bottom of his heart he felt a certain sense of gratified vanity and triumph. How the woman must love him to write as she

did, to pour out her spirit at his feet! Where is the man who objects to be worshipped?

Also a vague and uneasy conviction came upon Waring that he might possibly have given Deborah some reason for her belief. He remembered how warmly he had espoused her cause. Had she mistaken pity for love? Then with regard to himself, man is a strange animal, and does not wholly understand his own complex temperament, with its blending of brute and angel. Perhaps he had been self-deceived, and his friendship for Deborah been greater than he had fancied. He might even have loved her half unconsciously. He had heard of such cases before, met them in history and in the lives of his friends.

Deborah had certainly absorbed him whilst he had been with her, and he had felt her curious fascination. He remembered how her beauty had attracted him first of all—"The Shulamite herself"—so he had cried when he caught sight of her standing on the stoep of the lonely farm; and, later on, how interested he had been in her strong personality, her primitive instincts, and her morbid pessimism. His thoughts had gathered round her constantly; he had been unable to dismiss her day and night from his mind. But was he to call this love?

The question resolved itself into one that has puzzled mankind for many a long century, and been responsible for most feminine heartaches. Is it possible for a man to care for two women at

the same time? If so, Waring must have loved Deborah from the first moment his eyes fell on her, and she, unaware of his attachment to Joan Desborough, had been justified in the position she had taken up, for Waring held the theory that if a woman was conscious of a man's regard, she had a certain right over his life and actions.

Deborah and Joan: what a contrast they afforded to each other—two women so utterly different that they could hardly be regarded as rivals—Deborah the personification of resolute strength and barbaric passion. Joan with her weakness of disposition and her trained sentiment. Two greater opposites could not be imagined.

"If it is true," exclaimed Waring, half aloud, "that a man possesses a dual nature, it is only consistent that he should love two women, and in my case the primitive man goes out to Deborah, whilst myself of this century is naturally attracted by Joan. Oh! the quaint tangle. And who's going to pull the thread straight—who?"

He knit his brow. "God knows, I never meant Deborah to care for me," he muttered between his teeth, "and had no idea she would—no more idea than that I care for her as it seems I do." He opened her letter and read it through again. "Oh, my Shulamite of the veldt!" he said passionately, "what demon who juggles with men prompted you to write to me? You wrote with a shaking hand, dear;

but I think you dipped your pen in something redder than ink. Your cry across the sea has roused the wild beast in me—the tearing, ravening beast we call by the name of passion. A hungry, red-eyed brute, good enough as a comrade for the first man unashamed, but hardly fitted for a Sloane Street flat. Joan would scream at the mere smell of its hot breath, whilst Deborah would exult in its uncurbed strength.”

He threw himself down on the divan in the centre of the room, and half closed his eyes.

“If I don’t go she will certainly write to Joan,” he said slowly, “and then there will be the deuce to pay. But if I go what will happen? Deborah and myself alone in the lonely farm listening to the purr of the beast, watching its flaming eyes, its sinuous leaps, waking at night to the sound of its loud, hungry roar. I must be true to Joan, to my wife. Whatever instincts of the past cling to me, I belong to her and to my age. Deborah must be sacrificed to Joan.” He spoke in short, broken sentences, thinking aloud. “I had better go to South Africa and have it out with Deborah. That seems the best course, the only course. Tell her the truth and make her see things as I do. So she would denounce me as Krillet’s murderer, would she, and see me hanged with pleasure?” He smiled to himself.

“What quaint stuff she is made of. I wonder if Medea resembled Deborah. It’s quite pos-

sible. I must get that confession of mine back, though; she could make trouble with it." He lit up a cigarette and threw his head back against a pile of cushions. "It will be strange to find myself at the farm again, very strange; but I always felt that the episode had not been finished, and that there was another chapter waiting to be written." He blew out a ring of smoke and watched it lazily. All at once the tinkle of a piano was heard. Joan was playing a waltz from "The Geisha." She had a light, pretty touch. Robert Waring listened for a moment, then a frown crossed his face.

"Joan before anyone," he said slowly, and as he spoke he tore Deborah Krillet's letter to pieces. Then, rising to his feet, he threw the torn scraps of paper into the fire. In less than a second they were charred ashes, and the passionate words of a passionate woman had burnt out in flame; but the tinkle of the waltz went on brightly. Waring laughed a little harshly as he listened to the music. "Joan Victrix," he said shortly. "Artificiality beats nature, weakness conquers strength."

CHAPTER XXX

THE CHILD AND THE DOLL

"I WOULD never have married you had I thought you cared so little for me." Joan pressed her lace-edged handkerchief to her eyes; for once in her life she was seriously distressed. Waring had broken to her that he must return for a few weeks to South Africa, and the bride of three months was justly incensed.

"What does it matter if you see your way to making a lot of money by buying the old farm?" she asked indignantly, "or if gold is to be found there?" For that was the explanation that Waring had given her. "We have plenty of money, oceans of it," she waved her beringed hands, "and we don't want any more."

"I do," retorted Waring shortly. He disliked having to lie to Joan, yet he could do nothing else. Her distress also at his departure had touched him. He had no idea she cared so much, and he was feeling out of humour with himself and the world, for he hated having to pain this brilliant butterfly. "Listen, Joan," he went on slowly. "Every man likes to get hold

of a good thing and not play the fool with a chance. Let me go to Africa. I'll not be away more than a few weeks, dear, and, believe me"—he added the last sentence earnestly—"I'm going more for your sake than my own, pet. What shall I give you when I come back—a set of turquoises and diamonds? Didn't you say you wanted one?" He stole his arm round Joan as he spoke. They were sitting side by side on the sofa; it was about ten o'clock at night.

Joan turned her head and looked at Robert; her brown eyes were moist with tears, and her underlip was trembling. She looked wonderfully pretty for all her grief; her pale blue tea-gown suited her, and emotion had flushed her cheeks a vivid pink.

"Why do you always treat me like a child?" she cried fretfully. Yet there was more depth in her voice than Waring had ever heard before. "You think I care for nothing in the world but clothes and jewels, and that my tears can always be dried with a new trinket; but it's not so, Robert. I'm not quite the doll you think me."

Her husband felt a distinct thrill of interest. Joan was developing a new side of her character. How could a man ever be dull with the great book of womanhood to study? He pressed the girl closer to him and kissed her parted lips, delighted that she presented a soul for his probing.

"Do you know that you are simply adorable, child?" he said softly. "I like you in this new

mood, a pouting Hebe, a weeping Greuze. You don't really mean what you say, though? You like being treated like a doll?"

"Not always." She tapped the floor with her little foot restlessly. Waring noticed the trim ankle, the dainty stocking with its rows of lace insertion, and the choice beading on the tiny slipper. "I am a woman, a fact you seem to forget, Robert." Her breast heaved a little under the soft silk folds, and there was a look in her eyes that he found difficult to fathom. "I am a woman," she repeated slowly, "and some day I shall have woman's work to do." She turned her head away as she spoke, but he was too absorbed looking at the curve of her long eyelashes to notice and take in the meaning of her words. She was silent for a moment—waiting. When she spoke again it was with a complete change of voice and manner. He had not understood what she meant to convey.

"It isn't kind of you to go abroad just now and leave me, Robert, it isn't really; I shall miss you." She twisted her rings as she spoke.

"But it will not be so very long before I shall be back again," he answered cheerfully, "and you will have Olive to go about with. Shall I buy you a motor before I start, a smarter one than hers?"

"No, thank you, Robert, I don't want a new toy," she replied with some bitterness, "and I shall not tease you about going away again

You are your own master, and, as you say, I can always go about with Olive." She burst into tears as she spoke, big, rolling tears, and looked more like the spoilt child than ever.

"My poor little darling," whispered Robert, gathering her up in his arms. "I wish to God I had not to go, but what must be—must be. Now, don't cry any more, pet; we shall have the rest of our lives to spend together. I won't leave you again; no, Joan, I swear I won't. Now go to the piano and sing me something, and look cheerful, sweetheart. I married a butterfly, not a Niobe." He laughed as he spoke, and Joan laughed too, but there was something strained in her mirth, and though she crossed over to the piano it was some time before she opened the lid or seated herself in front of the instrument. She struck a few chords at last, and then began to sing, rather shakily at first—

"Sing-song in the green garden closes,
I am weary of your kisses, said the girl to the boy;
With my doll went all my blisses,
I am weary of your kisses,
And this thing is only sorrow that you told me was a joy."

Waring rose from the sofa, and came and stood behind his wife. What had come over Joan to make her sing that song, and put such strong, almost passionate, feeling into the concluding lines?

"Sing-song in the green garden closes,
But what's the good of crying for a broken—broken toy."

The girl's voice rang out shrill and strained. She was keeping back tears with an effort. Waring put his hand on her shoulder.

"And what's the good of singing such a mournful song?" he asked tenderly. "Are you tired of my kisses, Joan?"

"No," she answered in a low whisper, "but I want to be sensible and clever; something more than a toy. I'm idle and lazy and frivolous; I can't help it, I was born so, Robert, and that's why you find it so easy to go away and leave me. If I were a different sort of person——"

"You wouldn't be half so sweet," he whispered, bending down and kissing her little ear. "I love you just as you are."

"You will see that woman again," she went on, striking a chord every now and then on the piano as she talked, "the woman you used to call the Shulamite?"

"Yes, I shall see her again," he replied slowly.

"Was she very beautiful, Robert?" Joan turned her head and looked her husband full in the eyes.

"She was very beautiful in her own peculiar way." He tried to speak easily, and in an unconstrained fashion, wishful at heart that Joan would change the subject; but she returned to it persistently.

"Yes, I always thought she must be beautiful." Joan paused; then said softly, "When

you see her again, Robert, will you try and fancy I am with you? I don't know why, I'm sure," and she laughed rather nervously; "but I've got a queer fancy that she's rather fond of you."

"I should forget such a foolish fancy," he replied quietly. "But you may be sure of one thing, Joan: when I am with Deborah Krillet I shall think of you; you can trust me, little Joan."

"Yes, I know I can," she answered rather wistfully. "I am stupid to-night, Robert," she went on timidly, "because I feel as if the door of my playroom had been suddenly shut in my face, and I had been told to begin to learn lessons. Do you understand?"

"Only that you are a foolish child," he replied lightly. "I don't want you to learn to be wise. I should hate it. I married a dancing fay, and I wish her to remain one. Now go to bed, sweetheart, and wake up bright and cheerful to-morrow."

She put up her face to be kissed, then stole away softly, having lost for the moment her bright, bounding step. Waring, left alone, lit a cigarette, and began to cut the pages of a new review. He was puzzled by Joan's conduct, and did not understand it. What had come over the butterfly? He could not make this new mood out.

He might have comprehended things better if he could have seen his wife at that moment. Joan had slipped into a loose muslin dressing-

gown, trimmed abundantly with lace and ribbon, and had sent her maid away, preferring to be alone with her own thoughts. Her thick brown hair fell in rich waves round her tiny face; her rings still flashed and sparkled on her fingers; but for the nonce Joan Waring was neither thinking of herself nor her jewels, but of a certain wonderful fact that she had only guessed within the last few hours.

A look of startled awe had come into her pretty eyes, and even the childish face was full of wonder. How marvellous it seemed that she, Joan Waring, should have been suddenly called upon to fulfil woman's greatest mission, and how helpless she felt, and unprepared.

She who had only lived to enjoy herself, and whose greatest excitement had been the arrival of a milliner's box, or a visit to the jeweller's, no wonder she felt overwhelmed by the prospect facing her; a little terrified, a little dazed.

Why was Robert going away, just in these first weeks when she would need comfort so? It seemed very hard! She felt too shy to tell him the truth. Like most modern girls, she had a dread of discussing the subject; a delicate shame over the whole business. Even now her cheeks kept flushing, though she was alone in her own bedroom.

She would tell Olive, of course; but Olive would be disgusted with her, for Mrs. Denvers had views on the subject of maternity, and small liking for babies. She could imagine her

sister's face when the news was broken to her. "Oh, Joan!" she would protest; "how terrible! Why, you will have to give up your season!"

Joan smiled a little dolefully. She had been looking forward so much to the gay whirl, and now she would have to retire from the world. How hateful everything was. Suddenly, and how it came she knew not, a delicate rose-leaf thought seemed to float into her heart, and in a second the room became full of cherub babies. How beautiful children were! That was Joan's first impression, and then the next second she realised that her arms and the room were empty. The words did not strike her as silly now, and she began to wish the harvest moon had brought her the promised gift. Then, wet-eyed, but smiling, she slipped into her silk nightgown, and cuddled up in bed, and soon she was fast asleep.

Waring shaded the light from her eyes carefully as he gazed down on her an hour later, wondering why a tear still glittered on her lashes, admiring the lovely little face, flushed and rosy with sleep.

"What a child she is," he muttered to himself, a smile crossing his lips, "a precious, spoilt child. It's impossible to regard Joan as a woman."

Yet even as he spoke Joan stirred faintly and moved her arm as if to cradle a babe at her breast. The child was dreaming of her doll, but Robert Waring, who thought he knew so much of women, never for one second guessed the truth.

CHAPTER XXXI

WARING RETURNS TO THE FARM

DEBORAH KRILLET stood by her husband's grave. She hardly knew what strange impulse had taken her to the burial-ground—a spirit to her feet seemed to have forced her to the spot.

The dawn was beginning to streak the sky. She had made her way to the graveside in the dark, and it was bitterly cold. Frost glinted everywhere, sparkling, glittering frost.

Deborah liked the chill and the dark. She was out of tune with God's sunshine. Her face looked very set and white in the pale light of the dawn, and hoar-frost shone in the veil of her red hair. She had drawn a thick woollen shawl across her shoulders, and clutched it tightly with her cold, blue fingers.

She bent over the long, narrow grave.

"Dead man," she whispered in a trembling voice, "are you awake? Can you hear me? Do you know that the solitude of the farm is driving me mad, and that I have had to come here—to you—for comradeship?"

If the dead man heard he made no sign.

"He has married a wife," Deborah went on, still in the same loud whisper. "Are you glad of that, Simeon Krillet? She is young, and rich, and beautiful. Isn't he a lucky man, Simeon? And are you not glad at heart that this has come upon me—to live deserted?" Her tears were falling fast, dripping on his grave. "That has become my lot, and my beauty is beginning to fade. Dead man, are you satisfied? Do you want to hear more?"

A little wind stirred the grass on the grave as though in answer.

"Ah, you want to hear more," continued the woman. "I thought as much, and so you shall. I have sent for him, Simeon, I have sent for him!"—she was speaking with a certain savage earnestness,—“and he will have to come to me. Have to leave the side of his bride, the warmth of her arms, the fragrance of her kisses, because Deborah Krillet calls him across the sea. Do you think you are sufficiently avenged? Stand by our side when we meet, the betrayer and the betrayed; hear the question and the reply, and then go back to your grave, dead man, and sleep soundly till judgment day, leaving the punishment of Robert Waring to me.” She laughed shrill and fierce, till she caught herself shuddering at the sound of her own terrible laughter.

She turned from the grave with a low cry, and buried her face in her hands. When she looked up at last it was to face a burst of sunshine. Day had leapt from the womb of dawn.

"Oh, I'm mad, mad," she muttered; "the silence and the loneliness of the farm have got upon my nerves, and made me worse than a frightened child, or I should never have been wild enough to come here, to run from my bed to Simeon Krillet's grave." She gave a nervous shiver. "If he has really heard me," she went on slowly, "how he must be laughing now, laughing and mocking me in his heart." She cast a swift, uneasy glance at the grave, almost as if she expected to encounter Simeon Krillet's jeering gaze, and for the flash of a second she seemed to see his face, his lips smiling sneeringly, his eyes blazing with fury.

She felt a wild terror of this self-conjured vision, and began to run forward in the direction of the farm. She tore along breathlessly, racing wildly, a woman pursued by fear, and as she ran she seemed to hear the bare feet of Simeon Krillet in hot pursuit. She never dared to glance back; she had no courage to reason out the absurdity of her fancy.

When she came in sight of the farm, she ceased to run at such breakneck speed; there was something of the ordinary and commonplace in the long narrow building with the Kaffirs' kraals behind, and the spectacle of a Kaffir boy squatting down on the stoep helped her to restore the balance of her mind. The boy wouldn't look up with that foolish grin if he saw the dead man running after her; he would have uttered a wild scream of frantic terror and bolted indoors

for his very life. No, she had out-distanced Simeon Krillet; she had left him behind in the graveyard.

She put her hands up to her head mechanically to smooth back her hair, for it was blowing about her face in wild confusion, but the disarray suited her. Then, as she stood breathless and panting, her shawl half slipping from her shoulders, her fingers still busy with her hair, the little Kaffir maid came running out on the stoep.

Even from where she stood Deborah noticed the girl's excitement. Her big eyes were dancing, and her huge lips were parted in a wild grin, and with a sharp catch of her breath Deborah realised what had happened. Robert Waring had returned, and the Kaffir had come out to seek her with the news. She felt as certain of this as that she was alive and the sun shining overhead.

She made no effort to go forward and enter the farm; her hunger to see him seemed to have vanished with the knowledge that he was there. A hazy wonder as to how they would meet crossed her brain. Would he reproach her or she reproach him? She thought listlessly how little anything really mattered. Yes, all was over as far as their real selves went—all was over. He had married another woman. It was fear, not love, that drove him back to the lonely farm; and she, Deborah Krillet, had partially accomplished her vengeance by the mere fact of having compelled his return.

The Kaffir girl caught sight of her mistress, and ran to meet her, the rags she wore fluttering round her thin, bare legs.

"He's come, Vrow Deborah," she cried gleefully; "the Englishman is here. He came about sunrise, driving in a Cape cart, and wearing such good clothes. Bless the dear Lord for dreams. Didn't I dream but a week ago that I saw you and him walking into a new farm all painted white; and wasn't a blessed Angora ram dancing about like a creature demented with joy? 'That means the vrow's marriage,' I said when I woke; 'it's a sure sign,' and now the Englishman comes along just to prove the dream was right." The Kaffir poured her words out wildly, but she winced as Deborah suddenly struck her cheek, and looked at her mistress with startled, puzzled eyes.

"What have I said, vrow?" she asked, rubbing the injured spot and speaking sulkily. "The good Lord sent the dream—I didn't."

"Hold your mad tongue," said Deborah in low tones. "The man has married an Englishwoman. Don't start like that, girl; what does it matter to you? Don't follow me; I am going into the farm to see Robert Waring." She said the last words very slowly and clearly.

The little Kaffir maid watched Deborah disappear into the farm; then she put her hands on her hips and rocked her body backwards and forwards. "To marry an Englishwoman," she muttered in blank bewilderment, "and Vrow

Deborah with twenty thousand sheep, a big farm and good money." She spat on the ground defiantly. "Ach, the dear Lord, the man must be mad, mad."

Whilst the Kaffir ruminated on the strange conduct of Robert Waring, he and Deborah were facing each other in the parlour of the lonely farm—two pawns of fate, moved to their position by the player Destiny.

CHAPTER XXXII

DEBORAH ASKS A QUESTION

FOR a moment Deborah Krillet and Robert Waring looked at each other steadily and silently. They had come, and both knew it, to one of those decisive scenes which colour life. This fiery moment, preluded by years and months of dreary monotony on the woman's side, appealed equally to the man. He was alive with a sense of drama, uncertain how the tragedy would end.

For they were playing out a tragedy, the idyll of the vineyard was over, the Shulamite had been treading the grapes in the winepress, and they were sour grapes. So much he could tell from her eyes and the bitter curve of her lips.

The man and woman faced each other as combatants; a duel was to be fought, so they measured strength and weapons.

The woman was the first to speak; her voice when she began was low and tremulous, the sight of Robert Waring had weakened her. She had thought to meet him with hate; this, she now discovered, was not possible.

"So you have come back?" she felt as she spoke that her words were feeble and pointless, and not the least what she intended to say, but her brain seemed to have become dull and blank. She had a dim notion that she had meant to receive Waring with loud and passionate reproaches, to cast her ruined life in his face, her broken heart, her spurned love; but at the moment words failed her, as did the power to express thoughts or even to concentrate them.

"Yes; but against my will. You must know that well enough." Waring shrugged his shoulders and spoke in rough tones. He felt convinced he must play the scene brutally to get through it at all. The sight of Deborah had set him tingling; she had never appealed to him more than she did now, but he had set his will and heart to be true to Joan. Yet it was terrible to gaze at Deborah and realise that he had wrecked her life and awakened her to passion, played with her soul as a child plays with a toy, plucked a peach with no mind to eat it.

"You have done a cruel thing, a cowardly thing, Deborah Krillet," he went on sternly, "in dragging me away from my wife. I came out here to spare her the shock of hearing that I had killed a man in cold blood, not on my own account. No jury on earth would do anything but acquit me, for if I hadn't fired, by God, the man would have killed you." He spoke with

decision, realising that he must carry things off with a high hand.

"It was murder, whatever you may say," she answered with trembling lips, "a cruel and deliberate murder. Simeon Krillet never intended to shoot me. He tied me to the tree to flog me because he thought I was untrue to him. You came up like a coward and shot him, crouching yourself behind the shelter of a wall. That is the story I shall tell at your trial; judge for yourself how it would affect the verdict." She looked up at the man defiantly.

"You would say that!" he exclaimed, making a step forward. "You would swear to a lie, swear my life away, and why?" Yet even as he asked the question Robert Waring guessed her answer.

"You ask me why," she replied in low tones, her eyes seeking the ground, her breast heaving furiously, the colour standing out in vivid patches on her face. "Because I hate you, Robert Waring, and want to make you suffer." She clenched her hands fiercely, struggling against a tenderness for him that made her rage futile.

"Deborah, be reasonable," he said slowly. "What have I done to incur this hate? I had to return to England; the sudden change in my fortunes demanded it. Also"—he hesitated for a second, then went on firmly—"I was engaged to be married to the lady who is now my wife; it was my duty to return to her. Surely you must understand that?" He real-

ised as he spoke that he was trying to give her a wrong impression of the motive that had sent him home. "Duty" was a big card to play, and he played it for all its worth. "I had kept her waiting beyond all patience," he went on, "because I could not bear to leave you alone; then she wrote, and I had to go—in all honour I had to."

Deborah's eyes gleamed with a curious light; she beheld a mystery made plain, Waring's desertion explained. "You were bound to her all the time, then?" she said in low, hoarse tones. "Betrothed to this woman you have married when you first met me? I am beginning to understand things now! You—you couldn't altogether help yourself, perhaps; you felt compelled to return." Deborah spoke in short, disconnected sentences, as if reasoning the matter out to herself. "But answer me one question, Robert," she continued, looking him straight in the face. "It was duty, not love, that took you back to England, wasn't it? She, that woman, is nothing to you really, and what you wrote about me you meant; I am the Shulamite, and you love me!" She smiled softly as she ended her speech. No Eastern woman, not even the Beloved herself, could have looked more seductive than Deborah Krillet at that moment. She seemed aflame with passion, and yet there was nothing coarse or unwomanly in her expression or even in her appeal to Waring. To look at her was to understand that she could

not be judged by narrow social laws; she had got above and beyond them. She was a woman holding out her arms to a man; a woman, as she had been at the beginning, even in the first days of Eden.

The temptation came fierce on Waring to save the situation with a lie. He knew if he chose to impress upon Deborah that he had married Joan against his own desire, and because he felt morally bound to her, he would be out of an awkward position, and free to take the journey back to England. Only it would be playing the game too low, and he could not suffer such a slight on his wife. Neither could he explain to Deborah that in his own way he loved her; that would only intensify the temptation for both, for Waring was compelled to realise that she possessed a wild and powerful attraction for him. He loved her and had to admit it to himself, and the mere fact of this spelt disloyalty to Joan. Sweet, dainty Joan, amusing herself happily in England, little guessing what strange drama was being acted out by her husband and this woman of the veldt.

"Why don't you answer?" asked Deborah after a lengthy pause. "It is well that we should know each other's hearts. Why waste our lives and spoil our summer if we love each other? Forget her, now you have returned to me. You have kept your oath and married her. Let that be enough. For myself, I love you too well to need ring or vow; I belong to you

absolutely. Don't think me shameless," she added, with a deep flush; "some power within me forces me to tell you the truth—a power I must obey."

Robert Waring bent his eyes on the ground. He dared not look at Deborah's flushed, beautiful face, and he had to fight back the desire to take her at her word and accept the love she proffered—fight with all his strength. How different this magnificence of passion, this superb bestowal, to the business-like fashion in which Joan had discussed settlements and shrunk back from too much ardour on his part. She had always been daintily cool, and hedged about by a thousand affected scruples, even on their honeymoon, yet he had appreciated her delicacy, even as he was swept away now by Deborah Krillet's abandonments; but it was Joan he must be true to—at all costs, Joan.

"Don't speak like this, Deborah," he said quickly, trying to soften what he had to say, and take the edge off his rejection of her love. "It pains me so bitterly. I appreciate—before God I do—the honour you have done me in caring for me ever so little. But"—he faltered and hesitated, then added firmly—"I love my wife, and I married her because I loved her."

Deborah turned white to her lips; she raised her left hand to her mouth, and bit the nail of her first finger, nibbling at it fiercely and cruelly, and when she spoke finally, her voice was weak

and thin, all warmth and strength gone out of it.

"You never loved me then? Let me have the truth at last—cut me across the face with it—stab me at the breast."

"I always admired and pitied you," Waring answered slowly. "I realised your hard and uncongenial life. I admired your great beauty, and we drifted into a warm friendship, but, as God is my judge, I never guessed you misunderstood its nature! Oh, don't wince like that, Deborah," he added hastily. "It must have been my fault. I must have given you a wrong impression—betrayed so much interest that you were justified in your conjecture!" He blundered on awkwardly, wishing she would do anything but gaze at him with those blazing eyes; hating the thought that he had driven all colour away from her lips and cheeks. It was as if he had killed the living Deborah, and been suddenly confronted with her ghost.

"Answer me in plain words," she said in low tones. "Were you only amusing yourself with me, and true at heart all the time to Joan Desborough? Did you write lies in your book, the little book that aroused such frenzy on the part of Simeon? Have I played the part of a Hagar, and do you send me out to starve in the desert at the nod of the lawful wife?" She was speaking rapidly, pulling as she spoke at one of the bone buttons on her dress, twisting it off at last with a jerk as she finished her sentence.

"I don't know. I cannot understand what I really feel for you," Waring replied slowly, "and I dare not ask myself. Let it be enough for us both that I love my wife, and that I put her first, absolutely first!" He stopped speaking, startled by the blaze of fury in Deborah Krillet's eyes, and the expression of her face.

"I am answered," she cried passionately. "You have answered me. She is first in your heart and thoughts, this cursed Englishwoman, with her pink-and-white face, her curly hair; and I—I am deserted and desolate. Don't speak to me." She raised her hand defiantly, and he saw how the fingers were shaking, and longed to comfort them in his own warm clasp. "Listen to what I am going to say, Robert Waring, and drink as deep of woman's hate as you have drunk of woman's love. As you came to this farm leaving your wife, this dear wife of yours"—she spoke mockingly—"at my bidding, so you shall remain here at my pleasure. If you attempt to return to England, I will accuse you of Simeon's murder, and your wife will hear of your arrest. Do you know"—she advanced close to him, so close that her hot breath swept his cheek—"I would far rather see you swinging from a gibbet than sailing back to England—to her."

She turned as she spoke, and ran hastily from the room; he heard her sobbing as she tore up the stairs.

“A confoundedly awkward position,” remarked Waring to himself. “But what a character to study! The Shulamite can hate as fiercely as she loves, and, by Jove, how magnificent her rage is!”

CHAPTER XXXIII

A CRY FROM HOME

HOURS lengthened to days, and days to weeks, but Robert Waring still remained a prisoner at the lonely farm, kept there by a strong woman's will and the fatal chain of entangled circumstance.

He had by necessity fallen into his old post of overseer. Here was plenty of work for a man's hand, so his time was fully occupied; for the Kaffirs had got lazy under Deborah's rule, and things had to be got into trim again.

As Robert Waring wandered round the sheep kraals, or directed work in the fields, his thoughts strayed back to England, and he wondered how much longer the present state of affairs would last.

Surely Deborah would awake before long to the futility of keeping him a virtual prisoner, and would tell him he was free to go home. She was only wreaking out a fit of jealous rage, from which she would soon recover to feel ashamed of her conduct.

So he argued, but meanwhile the days slipped by.

He grew restive. Joan would be getting uneasy, his long absence would affront and alarm her; yet, whenever he broached the subject of his departure to Deborah, she repeated what she had said on the day of his arrival, adding passionately: "Let your wife suffer as I have suffered. You deserted me, now desert her. Learn for yourself what sorrow of heart is, yearn for her as I yearned for you—and as hopelessly."

Against such words and such a mood what was there to say? Deborah was the type of woman to destroy what she most loved; she had all the savage as well as the passionate instincts of the past. The only thing to do was to remain passive and trust to the situation getting upon her nerves and her will breaking down under the strain.

It was a cruel situation for both—an almost impossible one. The man never spoke to the woman save to discuss matters relative to the farm; the woman was as tongue-tied.

Since the hour when Waring had confessed that his love was to Joan, Deborah had abandoned all idea of him as her lover. The man had made his choice; as he had chosen so let it be. She had a certain amount of wild, half-savage pride in her, and would have dared hell had she believed that she was the real woman in Waring's life, and that he had only married Joan from a strained sense of honour; and she would have done her best to allure and fascinate and steep

the man against remembrance of the wife in England—even have tried to persuade him to break his marriage vow and bonds, holding that she had a stronger, higher, and more natural claim to him than Joan, the claim of mutual love.

But he loved his wife best, and she would not stoop to steal affection already bestowed. Yet the man should suffer. To amuse an idle hour he had gathered the grapes of her love. Let him press them out and drink; he would find the vintage bitter.

She was at no pains to appear fair to him, to charm his eyes, enthral his senses. The day of desire was over. She took a curious pride now in presenting herself at her worst. She would have nothing from the table of the Englishwoman, not even a crumb of stray admiration, or one soft word.

She pressed the shining glory of her hair into tight, hard coils, and wore loose, coarse blouses that completely hid her shape, put on her thickest shoes, and roughened her hands with household tasks.

Waring noticed this, and in a subtle fashion it appealed to and attracted him. The complexity of the woman had always held him more than her great beauty, and there was a certain fierce dignity in this new move. Besides, try as she would, the Shulamite could not destroy the splendour of her general pose. She walked the earth a queen by virtue of brow and breast,

and her lips were still a thread of scarlet, her eyes strange chambers of the soul.

He used to watch her during the long evenings, he seated in one corner of the parlour, she in the other; and though neither the man nor the woman said a word, each was absorbingly conscious of the other's presence. Deborah had her knitting, and Waring used to listen to the sharp metallic clicking of the pins, or else count the ticks of the clock, wondering what the woman was thinking of, and contrasting her with Joan—Joan his wife.

Then, when nine o'clock struck, Deborah would put by her work, summon the Kaffir maids, and read aloud a chapter from the Bible. The tone of her voice never varied, it was always clear and cold; but she read well and distinctly, only, as the man asked himself, how could she—oh, how could she? The reading over, she would bid Waring a curt good-night, and then go to her room, whilst he would wander out on the stoep for a few moments, to taste the bitter chill of an African midwinter night, tingling with sharp frost.

Another sort of man would have found this state of things frankly insupportable, and escaped from it at all costs; but Robert Waring was aware by now that he loved Deborah. He realised that the woman must know this or there would be trouble; also, that a few weeks must inevitably end the chapter, and he wanted to learn everything there was to learn

before he bade farewell for ever to Deborah Krillet.

Suddenly the conditions changed, and his stay at the farm became impossible, and return to England imperative.

A Kaffir boy sent to the town across the plain to purchase stores came back with a packet of letters for Robert Waring. The man felt that Deborah's eyes were on him as he received them, and to open a letter from Joan in her presence seemed impossible. So he gathered up his correspondence and took his way to his room.

He sat on the edge of his bed turning over the envelopes one by one. Yes, Joan had written. She was using her favourite mauve paper, as usual, paper faintly perfumed. He pressed the envelope to his lips in a sudden fit of tenderness. "Poor little Joan; dear little girl; what a brute she must think him to stay away so long." He did not open her letter at once; he was a great believer in the happiness of anticipation, so he put the thick envelope on the bed by his side, and took up another written in a feminine, scrawly hand. This letter was also heavily perfumed, and of a deeper shade of mauve than the colour employed by Joan. He guessed rightly that it came from Olive Denvers. He opened it with some eagerness, wondering rather what she had to say. After reading the first few lines he started and flushed a deep red, and for a second the world spun round with him. "I think you are a perfect fiend," so the

little lady had written, and Olive could be as fiery with her pen as with her tongue. "Other men look after their wives at such a time, even the greatest brutes of the lot, and here you are away in South Africa, and poor darling Joan worrying herself ill about you. I should think you might have some consideration for the unborn child, if you have none for your wife. I wish to goodness Joan had never married——"

The letter dropped from Robert Waring's hand, and the man experienced the most genuine emotion he had ever felt in his life. For once he was neither critical of mood nor analytical——only a mere man stirred to the depths of his soul.

He would be the father of a child. The old primeval spirit awoke in the man; the sublime instinct of paternity, with its mingling of pride and tenderness, hope and fear.

He drew a deep, long breath, and all his artificiality fell from him. Even his face changed, the mouth losing its cynical twist and a nervous smile taking its place. Suddenly his thoughts flew to Joan, dainty, delicate Joan, facing out such a trial alone.

He snatched her letter up, and tore it open with trembling fingers, longing the while to kiss and protect the writer, to gather her up in his arms and comfort her against his heart, for he guessed somehow that Joan needed comforting.

She had not written at much length. She asked simply when he was coming back; com-

plained of being tired and bored ; but gave no hint of the news Olive Denvers had put in her letter, save for a postscript which her husband understood : " I feel rather frightened ! "

That was all—" I feel rather frightened "—but how much it conveyed ! Waring conjured up a vision of the Joan who had written those words. Possibly she was huddled up in a big arm-chair, her large eyes glancing ahead at a day of torture, and he who should have been with her to caress and encourage—he was here !

The lines of Robert Waring's mouth took on a determined expression, and he clenched his hands firmly.

" By God," he swore out aloud, " I will not be kept here another day, another hour. Let Deborah do what she will, I'll get home to Joan, tell her the truth, and risk the rest. My Joan ! " He said the last words tenderly, feeling that the girl had a claim on him prior to any other in the world, seeing her wan and wistful in the halo of approaching motherhood.

He got off the bed and packed the few possessions he had brought with him to the farm in his leather valise. He went about the task quickly, and in a little while had strapped and buckled the portmanteau. His next task was to find Deborah and tell her of his determination to depart immediately.

She was sitting in the parlour, her hands lying idly in her lap, and her whole pose gave the idea of excessive weariness. There was

something lifeless in her expression. She looked up at Waring as he entered the room, but said nothing.

Outside a little snow was falling. Waring saw a few flakes as he glanced out of the window. It was only noonday as yet. He hoped no snowstorm was boding, but, storm or not, he would start within the hour.

"Deborah," he said bluntly, "you have kept me here long enough. I am going back to England to my wife!" He said the last two words with some defiance.

"Go, if you like," answered Deborah, almost indifferently, "and come back to be hanged." She looked up at him callously, but he noticed that her lips were twitching, and her eyes beginning to glow with sombre fire.

"I shall start in half an hour." He was taking things calmly, thinking it his best policy.

"I will follow you, and inform against you at the first town we come to!" She smiled to herself, knowing the game her own.

"Be reasonable, woman!" he cried passionately, realising she would do what she said. "Oh, Deborah, if you have a woman's heart in you, show a little pity now. I have heard from my wife. A child will be born to us! For God's sake, Deborah, let me return to her now! She is alone! She wants me!"

"What do I care!" Deborah's pale face flamed with colour and her voice was raised high and shrill. "Let her hunger and thirst for your

presence, this cursed Englishwoman, and the dear Lord make her day of trial painful. Hasn't she stolen you from me? Hasn't she got all a woman wants, the love of her husband, the promise of a child? And I stand here, a lonely woman forsaken by God and man! What should I know of pity? What pity has been shown me?" She poured her words out wildly, her cheeks alternately flushing and paling.

"Robert, I love you!"

Waring caught her by the shoulders. For the second he felt he hated her, and he hated himself too, because he was keenly alive to her maddening beauty, a beauty which made Joan's prettiness pale; Joan, with whom all his thoughts should be.

"I should like to kill you—you—you temptress!" he whispered hoarsely. "Simeon Krillet was right. You are the woman whose footsteps lead down to hell. But you shall never conquer me! Never—never—never!" He shook her fiercely, careless that his fingers were making cruel, livid marks on her white flesh. As for the woman, she gloried fiercely in the pain. Pain was good at his hands.

"Kill me!" she laughed mockingly, "and then follow me down to hell!" She suddenly caught the expression in his eyes. Her own drooped, and all the fire went out of them. She went backwards against the wall, "My God!" she muttered in low tones, "you love me."

"If I do," he replied steadily, "it makes no

difference, Deborah Krillet—no difference at all. I would throttle the life out of you with my two hands to spare Joan an hour's suffering. Doesn't that prove where my heart is?"

"It does indeed," she answered slowly, her face shining and transfigured. "You don't mind hurting because you love me, whilst you feel you owe a duty to her. Ah, Robert Waring, I know, I know!"

Did she know? Had she hit by strange chance on the truth? The man could not tell. During the pause that followed, the sound of rumbling wheels was heard. A second later a buggy passed the window; a woman was driving.

Deborah turned her head impatiently.

"Someone comes," she muttered. "Even Tant Annie Krillet herself. The Lord has delivered you into my hands. Shall I tell Simeon Krillet's sister that his blood is on your soul? Quick, for she knocks at the door."

"Do what you like," he replied in low tones. "I have told you my decision."

Both man and woman looked at each other steadily; the door opened, and Tant Annie Krillet entered.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"KILLED BY THE JUDGMENT OF GOD"

THE old Boer woman cast a sharp and suspicious glance at Waring, then walked up to Deborah and kissed her.

"It is true then what I heard," she said slowly. "The Englishman has come back. When will the marriage be?" She faced Deborah abruptly with the question, her small, cunning eyes scanning the girl's countenance.

Deborah hesitated for a second, and Waring noticed how white her lips had turned. "You talk foolish talk, Tant Annie," she said slowly. "The Englishman is married. He has a wife in his own country."

"The dear Lord!" The hard-faced woman put her hands on her hips, and surveyed Waring with an incredulous smile. "Then what are you doing here? Isn't it your duty to be with your wife? Married!" She burst out laughing, and looked at Deborah scornfully, repeating coarsely and defiantly the one word—"Married!"

Robert Waring made a movement forward.

It was hateful to notice Annie Krillet's vindictive smile and be unable to defend Deborah from her malice; and yet what could he say? He was married, and his place was not at the lonely farm, neither had he come there of his own free will.

"You don't look well, Deborah. Dear Lord, you are as white as a linen tablecloth—are you sick?" Tant Annie put her arm round Deborah's slender waist, and not too soon, for the girl swayed faintly against her. She had been living at high pressure for the last month, and this momentary breakdown was the almost inevitable result.

"Let me go to my room and rest for a moment or two," she muttered in low tones. "I shall be all right then; the cold and the falling snow made me feel dizzy!"

"A good thing I came to-day," replied the other. "I felt I had to, for you are going to be sick, Deborah. Don't I know? Haven't I had enough illness at the farm? You're stricken with the cold. Don't tell me. I know."

Talking thus, and taking no heed of Waring, who stood awkwardly by the window, she half led, half carried Deborah from the room. Like her dead brother, she was tall, raw-boned, and muscular, and her sister-in-law a mere feather-weight in her arms.

Waring watched the two women ascend the staircase, the drooping figure of the one, the

stiff, angular form of the other, and he bit his lips over the whole tangle. It seemed cruel to leave Deborah in the hands of Annie Krillet, and yet Joan called him, and her call must be obeyed.

Deborah gave a little gasp of relief as soon as she reached the anchorage of her room, and fell like a log across her bed, utterly beaten and spent, bodily strength and will power alike deserting her. She realised, albeit dimly, that Tant Annie was bathing her face with cold water, and she had a hazy impression of the strong odour of vinegar; then came a period of brief unconsciousness.

She came back to life with a long, sobbing sigh, then sat up on the bed and stared nervously at Tant Annie, fearful of a certain expression she read in the other's eyes, a hateful, questioning look that vaguely alarmed her.

"That man—the Englishman," observed Tant Annie slowly—"how long have you known that he has a wife?" she laughed coarsely and put her hands on her big hips. It was evident that she felt herself complete mistress of the situation, and enjoyed the triumph that she was having over Deborah, the pale woman crouching on the big bed, the woman who watched her with such restless, troubled eyes.

"Yes—I have known that Robert was married for a long time." Deborah spoke very slowly, and appeared to be weighing her words with care. "She is a pretty woman—she dresses

in silk and satin—her clothes are all trimmed with fine lace, Annie, and she never soils her hands—she does not know what it is to work. She is like a king's daughter—glorious without and within." Deborah shivered a little at the vivid vision her fancy had conjured up, and she saw Joan distinctly for a moment, clothing Robert Waring's wife in soft raiment—picturing the other in her English home, sheltered and protected—wrapped about with loving care. No pale, silent woman who dwelt amid lonely plains, but a little princess of ease and luxury—a dainty, laughing creature whom a man must needs serve on his knees.

For a second—one fierce, terrible second—the instinct was strong on Deborah to cry out the truth to her sister-in-law, and betray Robert to the grim, implacable woman who would at once take upon herself the rôle of the avenger of blood.

She had only to pluck Robert's written confession from the bosom of her dress and thrust it into Tant Annie's hands, there would be no need even for speech—she could betray Robert silently.

Deborah shivered and shuddered with the violence of the temptation, for it would cool the raging fire that burnt up her soul to feel that Robert was dead—dead—that he could never return to the smiling, laughing wife in England, but would belong for all eternity to Deborah of the plains.

It would be so restful to think of him lying dead, his dear pale lips sacred for ever from the kisses of love and life, his lips that Deborah had thirsted to drink from—thirsted vainly—his lips that Joan should never touch.

He would die thinking of Deborah—she who had betrayed him, and he would wait for her by the very doors of hell—the rope they had hung him with still looped about his throat—his voice aching to reproach her for her treachery.

But when she came—slain by her own hand—blown in a very mist of blood and fire—surely he would forgive and understand, and learn that love had slain him—love.

She would kneel at his feet and entreat him to remember her scorched-up youth—and he would look in her eyes and read the mighty passion of her soul and dimly realise the offering she had made of her womanhood—how she had withheld nothing but given all.

He would raise her by her hands, and then they would mix and mingle in one sublime embrace—and all would be as a dream—they would float away—away—to some glowing island of fire—they would be as dust blown by the wind, the wind of destiny—and together for evermore.

She drew a deep, hungry breath—then conquered herself, thrust temptation away. Robert Waring must not be betrayed by Deborah Krillet—so much was certain.

She slipped down from the big bed—a shaking, nervous figure, and faced her Boer kinswoman with a flickering smile.

“There—Annie—why should we waste good breath talking about the Englishman and his wife? Tell me how matters are going at your farm.” She spoke in quick, excited tones.

“Why don’t you want to talk about Waring?” interrupted Tant Annie sharply. “I believe you are jealous of this fine wife of his. Ah, I am right, for see you, Deborah, your face betrays you. You are red from neck to brow, whilst a second ago you were white as milk when it foams in the pan. Ah—these Englishmen—these cursed Rooi-neks—they are false tongued and false hearted—sons of the devil and ministers of evil;” she croaked the words out, wagging her head wisely, keeping her eyes fixed on her sister-in-law, who flinched as if she had been struck across the cheek. “Confess, Deborah,” Annie Krillet continued, “you love this man and he has scorned you—he has put you to open shame—he has mocked you in his heart.”

“Hush—for God’s sake, hush!” protested Deborah. She was swaying from foot to foot; her agitation was so great that she could hardly stand. “What is Robert Waring to me,” she asked wildly, “or I to him? Why should you speak of us like this? We are not even friends—we have become as strangers to each other. There’s the width of all the world

between us—the great, round, dusty world.” Her voice was full of intense melancholy, her air and whole mien was tragic, and her slight figure as she stood up in her straight, plain black gown set her forth as a daughter of desolation and sorrow—a woman who waited on grief; but to Tant Annie, who stared at her with small, glittering eyes, Deborah was only that rich woman—her brother Simeon’s widow—the woman of all women whom she hated.

Annie Krillet smoothed out a fold of her stiff black dress and gave a little dry cough.

“The Englishman may be nothing to you now,” she observed slowly, pursing up her thin ugly lips, “but I have eyes in my head, and there was a day when you looked on him and you loved him. Don’t contradict me, Deborah, or lie vainly—for I tell you I am no fool, and I know what I know.” She stamped her broad, flat foot till the floor creaked under her weight, and the heavy bed and large wooden wardrobe quivered.

Deborah smiled, a pale, weary smile, and her eyes grew disdainful and mocking in their expression.

“How like you are to your brother—Simeon,” she said coldly, and her speech puzzled Tant Annie, she detected some veiled satire, some subtle reproach.

“He was a good man, was Simeon,” she observed stoutly. “A good man—none better.” She glanced at Deborah as though daring the other to contradict her.

“He used to lash my shoulders till the blood

streamed down," the younger woman answered quietly, "this kind, good brother of yours, Annie—yes, even till I fainted from pain and the shame of it."

"Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth," replied Tant Annie unctuously. "Simeon only followed the Divine commands; you were a forward wife, I expect, and deserved every beating you got." She said the last words with venom.

Deborah's breast swelled under her tight black bodice, and a lump rose in her throat as she remembered cruel, merciless beatings, and all the pain and humiliation she had endured from Simeon Krillet, and her hatred of the man flared up into her face; she shook with passion and forgot all prudence and self-command.

"Simeon was a brute to me—a brute," she cried. "Oh, God of my fathers!—was I to blame for loving the Englishman, when he was the first to show me how men—true men—treat women, how kind they are—how gentle—how tender? Till he came—till I first met Robert," she went on recklessly, "I took Simeon as the type of all his sex, and I prayed to God for strength and patience to endure the heavy yoke imposed upon me—to be an obedient wife; but Robert taught me that no man has a right to beat a woman as Simeon beat me—and that it was wrong of me to submit to such brutal tyranny—wrong—wrong." She clenched her cold hands, her face had become as colourless as ash.

"Dear Lord!" Tant Annie shifted uneasily from foot to foot, absolutely taken aback by Deborah's sudden admission of love for Robert Waring and resentment towards her dead husband—stupefied and bewildered by her sister-in-law's revolt.

"What is this you are saying?" she went on, raising her voice and flushing an angry purple. "You are blaming my brother are you, and praising the Englishman—the Englishman who laughs at you in his heart and who never loved you." She snapped her big fat fingers in Deborah's face. "I tell you he mocks you," she said with a mean, evil smile. "He holds you as less than the dust—as a woman of no account—otherwise wouldn't he have married you, Deborah? You—a rich widow. Would he have sought a wife in England? Ja! you gave your love very foolishly—to have it thrown back in your pale, staring face—to be made a subject for laughter between the Englishman and his wife—poor, stupid Deborah." She laughed herself as she spoke, and the coarse, taunting laughter goaded Deborah almost to madness, all on edge as her nerves were already, and her heart and brain on fire.

"Robert loved me," she cried, facing Tant Annie defiantly; "he loved me well enough once—he did, I tell you, he did."

"Lies, vain lies," returned the other calmly. "You were a fool in his eyes always, a vain, conceited woman who believed that every man

who saw her must desire her. Just because my poor brother spoilt you so—gave you silk dresses and gold chains, loaded you with gifts—you fancied the Englishman must love you too. Bah! he was ready all the time to spurn you with his foot.”

“Robert loved me.” Deborah crossed her arms over her swelling breast; she was shivering all over. “Ah, my God! are his hands not stained in my quarrel?—did he not slay a man in my defence? What greater proof of love could he give than this? The woman in England—his wife—he never can love her as he loved me, for there is a covenant between us—even a covenant of blood.” She was heedless of her words, she spoke out of the jealous passion of her heart, moved to a blind fury by what Tant Annie had just said; but the Boer woman caught her breath and wondered if she could possibly have heard aright, surely her ears had deceived her—or was Deborah going mad?

“A covenant of blood!” repeated Tant Annie slowly. “Of what are you speaking, Deborah? Your words are vain and foolish unless—unless——” She started horribly and peered with her small black eyes into Deborah’s white face, for why had her sister-in-law suddenly stiffened and blanched?

Deborah had stepped back, and was leaning now against the bed. Her hands, thrown out behind her, gripped the coverlet, her fingers,

bent rigidly, dug into the folds of it. A great fear dimmed her eyes, her lips were parted but no sound came from between them, there were drops of sweat upon her brow.

What irrevocable words had she spoken? To what was she drifting? A long shudder convulsed her body and limbs—it was as the shudder of fever, and yet her hands and feet were cold, so cold that there was hardly any sensation in them. She disentangled her fingers from the covering of the bed and pressed them against her burning forehead; the contact brought coolness and warmth—she needed both.

The temptation that had assailed her but a few minutes ago—the temptation to betray Robert—had her wild jealousy brought her back to this? She was not mistress of herself, she had lost all self-command, and this terrible woman could mould her like clay, could force her to speak words that were poisonous and death-dealing as the venom of the snake.

She clenched her teeth and drew in her breath chokingly. If she had but time to think—if she could but bridle her tongue with reason—or be silent!

Tant Annie gave her no time. The suspicions of the Boer woman were aroused, and Deborah's attitude of terror seemed to confirm them. She pressed her advantage home.

"Deborah, explain yourself—you must!" Tant Annie had advanced as the younger woman receded before her. She faced Deborah

fully, her neck craned forward, peering intently into the face of the other. Her eyes stabbed cruelly, biting through the flesh to the very soul. "A covenant of blood between you and this Rooi-nek? A man slain in your defence? Whom did the overseer slay? Speak out, woman, lest I lay my hands upon you and shake the truth from your lips."

With a sudden access of fury Tant Annie gripped her sister-in-law by the shoulders. "Whom did he slay?" she repeated.

"You are hurting me." Deborah, with a violent effort, wrenched herself free. "How dare you lay hands upon me, Annie? I am not bound to answer you." Her defiance was but a short-lived thing. "Oh, don't you understand," she murmured plaintively, "that I don't know what I'm saying? You yourself said that I was ill—you brought me here to tend, not to torture me with questions. In kindness leave me to myself, or you and I—you and I, Annie—may regret it."

But Deborah's appeal passed unheeded. Tant Annie was not the woman to show mercy when her enemy had been delivered into her hands. At any other time she knew that Deborah was well capable of holding her own; the opportunity was not to be thrown away. If there was any secret to be learnt, any mystery to be cleared up, it was now that it must be forced to the surface, now or never.

"Leave you so that your heart may have

time to fashion a lie for your lips to speak? Is that your desire, Deborah? But no—you shall have no rest till you have spoken." A fearful thought came of a sudden to the woman's mind. She drew back a little, resting her large coarse hands upon her hips. "You say that Robert Waring slew a man. I know of none who has met with sudden death—none save Simeon,"—she spoke the words slowly and with stress;—"but if murder has been done——"

"It was false." Deborah spoke despairingly. "I spoke in the madness of jealousy. Don't you understand that? Robert murdered no one. The good Lord knows that he is innocent of wanton bloodshed."

"Since you will not speak, Deborah, it will be easy to question him," returned the other. "There are those who will see to it that he speaks the truth. Oh, this lover of yours!" She threw all the scorn of which she was capable into the cry. "A Rooi-nek, son of a race accursed! Taken in, fed, made one with us; and for what? That he should betray his master. He won your love—do not deny it, Deborah—with his fine speeches; he weaned you from your husband, a good man. And now you say that he has done murder——"

"It was no murder. He slew in my defence." It was as though the bitter cry was forced from Deborah's lips. She was tortured beyond bearing. She could not make good the words she had already spoken, the words by which she had

inadvertently betrayed her lover. She felt that Tant Annie was but playing with her, suspicious from the first, certain now that Simeon's death had not been the result of mere accident.

What was the good of further concealment? Fate had decided. But now, at this supreme moment, all her desire was to save Robert—Robert whom she had so lately pictured with a halter about his neck. That had been but a folly of thought, this was stern reality.

"Ah!" Tant Annie's voice rang triumphant. "You admit it is true he killed. It was no jealous lie you spoke." There was something of real horror in her tone as the inevitable truth, the truth suspected but not yet voiced aloud, came home. Once more the woman brought the keenness of her eyes to bear upon Deborah's face. "It was no accident that brought Simeon to his grave," she muttered. "You killed him—you and your accursed Englishman. I see it now. We were befooled, I, his relations—all. We believed the story of the lightning and the broken cart. We took your word as the word of an honest woman. Not even—" she laughed shrilly—"not even when I read what you had written in the Book did I suspect. 'Killed by the judgment of God'! Why did you write that? I wondered, but I held my peace. You were never like to one of us. And you hated Simeon—I knew that you hated him. But between hate and murder—" she broke off, panting heavily, the words stifled in her throat.

"I wrote the truth!" Deborah drew herself up defiantly, a certain courage regained now that the worst was known. "It was by the justice of God that Simeon perished. He would have killed me—he bound me to a tree and was about to shoot me—yes, in cold blood—but Robert Waring came and rescued me. It was the good Lord sent him. He is no murderer. See here—see—since you must know the truth——" her hand went to her breast. It seemed good that Robert should plead for himself. He had a power of speech, of expression, that she did not possess. Was not the paper that he had written, and which she kept hidden in her dress, a vindication rather than a self-accusation?

Then she remembered that this written confession would be a powerful weapon in the hands of Tant Annie, and knew that she had committed another error. She tried to thrust the paper back into the concealment of her bosom, but it was too late. The woman's sharp eyes had caught sight of it.

"What have you there?" Tant Annie thrust out her hand and seized the paper. Deborah made a faint effort to regain it. But she was thrown back and fell, reeling, against the bed. It seemed to her as though the whole world was tottering to its fall.

Tant Annie paid no heed to her. She had moved to the window and stood there reading. She muttered as she read, and her big black eyes rolled, her hands shook.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PRICE OF BLOOD

At last Tant Annie lifted her eyes from the sheet of paper that she clutched so tightly in her hand, and looked across the room at her sister-in-law, her eyes blazing with hate. In her cold way Tant Annie had loved the dead man, and they were of the same blood, had sucked the same breast.

For a moment or two the women gazed at each other silently, both alive to the terrific possibilities in front—Tant Annie seeking for words, Deborah waiting for what was to come.

“You ——!” The Boer woman called the other by a foul name, and Deborah winced under it as under a blow. She put up her hands as though to screen her face.

“Ah, hide it—hide it!” cried Tant Annie, advancing, purple with rage, to the bed, and glaring at the little figure crouching down amongst the tumbled coverlets, for Deborah had fallen back, a sick faintness coming over her. “It is an evil face. God help my poor brother

that he ever saw it! For the devil gave you your eyes, Deborah Krillet, and that false, treacherous mouth of yours! I blame you even more than I blame him, that cursed Englishman." She spat on the floor fiercely. "But he shall suffer! Lord, Lord, you shall both suffer! 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.' He shall hang for it—this Robert Waring—he shall hang! And as for you, you—" her invectives grew appalling—"your name shall be a by-word, a reproach! They shall scorn you from Sheba to Dan! They shall point at you, shameless one! You shall be accursed, here and hereafter! Dear Lord! you will burn in hell, you and your lover together! As God is judge, you will!"

She paused for a second, exhausted by her vehemence, at a loss for words. Then she suddenly bent down and snatched up Deborah in her arms, carrying her across to the window, the girl as helpless in her grasp as a babe.

"Look out—look out on the burial-field!" she continued, her breasts heaving, her voice low and thick. "It is your husband and my brother who lies under the ground, and whose blood cries out for vengeance. I see everything through a haze of red, Deborah Krillet!" She put the girl on her feet and pressed her hands wildly to her eyes. "I hear nothing but Simeon's voice. He is calling to me from his grave to avenge him, and he shall be avenged!" She suddenly turned from the window and bowed

herself over a chair, giving way to a passion of tears ; a grotesque figure of despair, her crimson face distorted, her hands shaking. "Lord, Lord," she muttered, "I can see him as a child, when we played together in that very burial-field, and hid behind the graves. He had such soft, pretty hair, such very soft hair." Her voice trembled. "And I can see him a man, tall, strong, and upright. Dear Lord, there wasn't a woman for miles who didn't cast her eyes at him. And then in his old age to be murdered—murdered—shot at from behind a wall—because he was bent on punishing the woman who had shamed him." She rocked herself to and fro in a perfect abandonment of despair, muttering fiercely, "But Robert Waring shall hang! Blood shall pay the price of blood! Be sure of that! The man shall hang!"

Deborah listened helplessly, clinging limply to the window curtain, still feeling faint and dazed. All at once an idea flashed upon her. There was a chance of saving Waring from the vengeance of Annie Krillet, from the hate which would pursue him like a sleuth-hound; only she must make haste and seize the moment.

She stole softly across the room and gained the door. The next second she had darted out and locked it upon a prisoner. Tant Annie Krillet hurled her huge bulk against the wood-work when she discovered what had happened, and shouted to Deborah to open the door, but

the girl took no notice of the loud, angry voice, for she had run down the stairs and burst in upon Waring in the parlour.

Let Tant Annie storm and kick, scream and yell, and dash herself wildly against the panels of the door; she couldn't break it open for all her fierce strength, so for a little while, at any-rate, Deborah held the game.

Waring looked up, perplexed, at Deborah when he caught sight of her standing in the doorway. Her cheeks were burning, and her hair streamed about her face and neck. Above, in the room overhead, he heard Tant Annie screaming furiously and banging at a locked door. What had happened? What did it all mean?

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Is the woman going to scream the house down? What have you done?"

"Locked her in the room," replied Deborah shortly, "and she doesn't like it. No matter, I had to." She paused a second and began to pleat and pucker a fold of her dress, not looking at Waring.

"Go and get your things," she said quickly, "and I'll go and order your horses and cart to be got ready. Be gone now as quickly as you can. Hurry, man, hurry!" She stamped her little foot impatiently. "It's a long way to England; start at once if you want to be there in time. Oh, for God's sake!" she added fiercely, "don't stand gazing at me like a fool. Didn't you beg and entreat me to let you go

but half an hour since, and now you dally and hesitate. Quick, before my mood turns."

He could not understand her, but he realised that it was a moment for decisive action, so he hurried upstairs to return in a few moments with his valise.

She was waiting for him in the narrow passage, and her small face looked white and set, the flush of colour having quite faded away. Every now and then Tant Annie's voice rang through the farm, screaming out that she would burst the door down if it were not opened. Then would follow a fierce but fruitless onslaught. Robert Waring noticed as he ran down the stairs how Deborah quivered at each crash, and shivered when Tant Annie's strident voice was raised to a still louder pitch; and he asked himself yet again what could possibly have happened.

"You are ready?" the girl spoke in repressed tones.

"Quite," Waring answered in a low voice. Then they both stood silent and motionless, waiting for the buggy to come round.

At last the sound of wheels was heard; a spasm shot over Deborah's face; then her lips tightened. She looked up into Waring's eyes.

"Go," she said slowly, "and may you be happy. I never meant really to harm you. I know that—now."

He made no answer for a second, only held out his hands. She hesitated, but finally extended her own. They stood hand in hand

gazing hard one at the other. Annie Krillet still beat against the door; outside they could hear the Kaffir boy talking to and patting the horses.

"Deborah," muttered the man hoarsely, "it's no good—I must speak the truth for once—I love you—and now, good-bye."

"Good-bye," she replied slowly. Then held her face up. He bent his head down and they kissed.

A moment later he had sprung into the buggy, and was whipping up the horses fiercely. Deborah watched him out of sight; snowflakes were still falling, more snow was to come. She threw her arms up with a sharp cry.

"My life and his life," she whispered to herself. "The threads are tangled; our lips have touched." Then she took her way to Annie Krillet, pausing outside the door.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TANT ANNIE'S BARGAIN

WHEN Deborah finally summoned courage to open the door, she was confronted by Annie Krillet on the very threshold. The Boer woman was crimson with rage, her eyes almost protruding from their sockets. She had broken her finger-nails tearing at the door, and bruised and scratched her hands. Her coarse grey hair, shaken down by her futile struggles, hung over her shoulders. She represented fury incarnate.

"You devil's spawn," she cried in hoarse tones of rage, "so you dared to turn lock and key on me whilst you went to warn your paramour. But he shall not escape me, he cannot escape me. Here, written in his own hand, is a confession of his crime." She brandished the sheet of paper in front of Deborah. "He has twisted the rope round his own neck," she went on passionately. "Let him make what peace he can with God, he shall feel the vengeance of man."

"I want to talk to you," replied Deborah quietly. "Go back into the room. What's

the use of all this violence, Annie Krillet? You cannot bring back a dead man from his grave."

"But I can be avenged on his murderer," panted the other. But she suffered Deborah to push her gently back into the bedroom; possibly she wanted to hear what the other woman would say, or her first paroxysm of fury was wearing off.

"Sit down," commanded Deborah, and Annie Krillet obeyed. She sank down on a big arm-chair, pushing her large feet out and resting her big, bony hands upon her knees.

"Now, say what you have got to say, wanton," she said fiercely, "and then let me get to my home. Not a night will I spend under this cursed roof, and to-morrow—to-morrow—Robert Waring will know the hate of honest Boers. I could tear the flesh from his face with my fingernails! Oh, Deborah"—there was a touch of grim pathos in her voice—"how could the wife of Simeon Krillet turn her eyes upon a Rooi-nek, a stranger! Shame on you, woman, shame! Didn't Simeon feed and clothe you, take you to his breast, and yet you played him false! You put him to shame."

"I loved Robert Waring!" Deborah spoke in clear, low tones. She was standing in front of Tant Annie's chair, like a prisoner on trial, her hands hanging loosely down, her head a little thrown back. "But, as God knows, we were nothing to each other. Nothing, nothing! I never betrayed Simeon. If you want to hear the truth, hear it!" She looked at Annie Krillet

defiantly. "I kissed Robert Waring's lips for the first time in my life to-day. It was all a mistake on Simeon's part and mine that he cared for me. He was loyal in his conduct all the time to the woman he has since married. He loved her, his wife."

There was something splendid in Deborah's pose as she said the last words. She was renouncing the dream of life, in the vain hope of distracting Annie Krillet from her scheme of vengeance. She was unsuccessful.

"Lies, lies!" muttered the other shortly. "If the man didn't love you, why did he ever come back again, leaving his own wife in England? Coming here like a bee to a honey-pot! May my sheep have the scab if I believe such nonsense. It is pure foolishness to waste your breath in such vain talk, Deborah. Am I as blind as a day-old puppy? I, who reared children whilst you slept in your cradle."

"Believe me or not, as you like," replied Deborah shortly, "I don't care, I have got beyond caring; but as for harming Robert Waring, you will not find that so easy. He is beyond your reach, he has left the farm, and God will cover up the track of his wheels with snow." She pointed as she spoke to the snowflakes now falling thick and fast. "You will not be able to leave the farm to-night," she went on triumphantly; "my Kaffirs shall splinter your buggy in pieces first, and I myself will shoot your horses. Have you ever seen a cat

fight in defence of its young—blind to pain and personal danger, changed into a tearing, rending devil? Look on me as just such a wild, desperate creature, and be careful, Annie. I would kill you with my own hands if I thought you threatened real danger to Robert Waring." She stopped speaking and panted a little. Tant Annie lost her crimson colour and became ashy pale; she looked at Deborah, and felt little doubt that the girl meant what she said.

"You little devil!" she muttered huskily. Then she half choked with a fit of impotent rage. "If I have to stay my hands now," she said after a brief pause, "it only means deferring the day of vengeance. He shall be found and brought back, even if he takes refuge in England. Yes, he shall be found! I swear it, I, Annie Krillet!"

"And if you find him, if he is brought back," asked Deborah impetuously, "what then? Do you think—can you imagine for a single second that he would be convicted of murder? He fired and killed Simeon Krillet, true; but remember, if he had not fired your brother would have killed me. I was a helpless woman tied to a tree, a madman's gun levelled at my breast. Was Robert Waring to stand by and see me done to death? It was my life against Simeon Krillet's."

"Fine talk!" muttered the other woman, "fine talk! But the men who will judge and condemn Robert Waring have small sympathy

for faithless wives. My brother was right to rid himself of that plague-spot in his life—to kill the wife who had betrayed him. He was in his rights, I tell you, vile thing that you are! God! what was there about the cursed Englishman that your heart went out to him? To love an Englishman—shameful! horrible!” She shook her head vehemently, her grey hair shaking into her eyes, those eyes lurid with passion. “And to be betrayed by him and deserted!” she went on, after a second. “He has married one of his cursed race, you say. A Boer woman was good enough to be his light-of-love, but he must marry one of his own breed. Isn’t that shame enough?”

“Be quiet!” cried Deborah, moving rapidly forward and clutching the woman’s hand with her little fingers. They bit into Tant Annie’s flesh like tentacles of steel, so strong and rigid the grasp. “If you do not hold your cruel tongue,” she went on, “I will strike you across the face. I tell you I had no part in Robert Waring’s life. He neither deceived nor betrayed me! He was never lover of mine!”

“You didn’t love him! Deborah Krillet, by the mother who bore you, you cannot tell me you didn’t love the man.”

Tant Annie half rose to her feet, shaking Deborah’s hand from her arm.

The girl glanced up at her interrogator, catching her breath nervously; then of a sudden a new spirit came over her, and she drew up

her little head with an indomitable air of pride.

"I loved the man; God of my fathers, I loved the man! You may call me shameless, you may call me vile—what do I care? I had given my love to no other, so to my mind my love was pure, absolutely! I was a purchased slave to Simeon Krillet, a free woman to Robert Waring. Not that he cared for me. You can be assured of that! The love was on my side, not on his, and I would swear to this on the Blessed Sacraments. Do you believe me, Annie Krillet?"

She bent forward, looking at the other earnestly, her renunciation absolute, her brain filled with one idea—to preserve Waring from Tant Annie's vengeance.

The Boer woman opened her mouth and gaped foolishly.

"If it is the truth, you are mad," she said at last, "to give up a good husband for a man who didn't value you the snap of his fingers; didn't want you. The dear Lord keep us from such foolishness—if it is the truth," and she shook her head suspiciously; but her confidence in Deborah's actual guilt was slightly shaken.

The girl saw her advantage and took it. She caught Tant Annie's hand and grasped it tightly. A bold stroke now and she might win the game.

"Give me back that paper," she whispered, "so that I may tear it up and burn it before

your eyes. I know where Simeon hid his money, Annie; all the money he left to me. You can take it away with you, down to the last coin, for the sake of the scrap of writing you hold in your other hand. Think what that means, Annie. Don't you want to run your fingers through a pile of golden coins and be half contemptuous of gleaming silver?"

Annie Krillet flushed up warm and crimson. Money meant more to her than to most people. Hard, mean, relentless, she had a craving for gold, and as Deborah spoke a sickly hunger awoke in her heart to take the bribe offered her. Only her pride revolted fiercely, also her affection—real in its way and strenuous—for the dead man. She bit her thin lips and moved uneasily on her chair.

"What do you take me for?" she muttered in harsh tones. "I will have vengeance on the man who murdered my brother. If you offered me all the gold and silver in the world I wouldn't sell you the paper in my hand. Dear Lord, you know that." But the grey eyes itched to be at the spoil, only the price would be as the price of blood.

"I tell you," Deborah replied slowly, "that Waring would go free. No jury could convict him or find him guilty of murder. His action was justifiable! Wouldn't I stand up and tell the whole story in the witness-box, and wouldn't my word be believed? Do you want your brother to be regarded as a coward, who justly

earned a dog's death? Have the story of his supposed dishonour in everybody's mouth, half the world believing that I played him false and the rest declaring that he was jealous for no cause? A man mad with his own wild conceit; a fool; and to be treated as a fierce beast shorn of judgment? What will men think of one who tied his wife to a tree to kill her in cold blood?" She looked at Annie Krillet half triumphantly. "Having no proof against her but his own vague thoughts; why, his friends will hide their faces for shame of such brutality, and women will spit at the mere mention of his name; children will be afraid—he will be an ogre to them at night."

"So you say," replied Tant Annie, swinging herself slowly backwards and forwards; "but we shall see, we shall see." Her mouth twitched as she spoke, and her face looked perplexed and irresolute. She seemed at war with herself.

Deborah caught hope from her expression. She tried another turn of the screw, her voice becoming lower and more seductive. "Think of the money, Annie," she said softly. "It is hidden safe and secure under the hearthstone in this very room. A rich prize for a mere scrap of paper that would bring you nothing except an everlasting slur on your brother's name. Bags of silver and bags of gold; the savings of years! You could buy sheep and oxen and hire Kaffirs; dower your daughters; set out your sons. And if you don't accept my

terms"—from a murmur of soft caressing sound her voice became stern and masterful—"every farthing I possess in the world, all the savings buried under the hearth"—she moved quickly across the room and tapped the hearthstone with her foot—"the money shall all be spent on his defence; poured, a thick gold stream, down the open throats of the lawyers, so that they plead their best in defence of the man who saved my life. I swear it. Do you hear me? I swear it."

Annie Krillet turned her head impatiently. She was torn in two betwixt strong emotions of cupidity and her lust of revenge. She would like to have killed Deborah as the girl stood up flushed and triumphant, her foot resting on the stone which hid the hoard from sight, the hoard of which she was the sole and lawful owner, her head a little thrown back, her lips parted in a curious smile. A wave of emotion radiated through her whole body, and seemed to overflow and envelop her personality, and to change her mood from depression and pleading to one of elation.

"Well," she cried after a long pause, during which the two women looked at each other fixedly, "have you come to any decision? Do you want to bathe your hands in gold, Annie Krillet, or in blood; red, glittering, gleaming gold; more gold than you ever saw in your life, Annie, and all yours—yours, for a torn scrap of paper? Choose, woman, choose!"

"I choose—the savings—his money," muttered the Boer woman in low, sulky tones. "That is, if you agree to a certain condition." She let her eyes fall to the ground as she spoke.


CHAPTER XXXVII

THE GREED OF GOLD

DEBORAH drew a deep and full breath of thanksgiving. Come what might, she had saved Robert from a great danger. For all her brave speech, her strong defiance, she had some doubts as to how matters would have gone had he actually been tried for Simeon Krillet's murder. His jury might have argued he could have wounded Krillet instead of killing him, or secured him from behind. She knew how the Boers hated Englishmen; yes, the day might have gone hard with Robert, and anyway there would have been the scandal, the disgrace of a trial.

She turned to Tant Annie, feeling an intense disgust and repulsion to the woman, the creature she had bribed. She had respected and admired her ferocious rage; she had only scorn for her now. This mood was expressed by her look and tone.

The elder woman had risen and shuffled across the room to the fireplace, where she knelt down, and tossing aside the small hearthrug began to



fumble with the heavy stone, but finding that she could not raise it, looked round for some instrument to use as a lever.

"Yes," said Deborah, disgusted at the Boer woman's miserly eagerness to get at the treasure, "it is there. You seem to know the spot. The price of an honest man's life lies under that stone."

"Let me see it. Let me see it," muttered the old woman.

There was an iron bar in the room used for fastening the window shutters. This Deborah brought to the vrow, who snatched it, and with some difficulty prised up the stone, Deborah standing over her and watching her contemptuously. When the long, heavy slab of stone was removed it disclosed a narrow cavity, in which lay a dusty iron box and two Mauser rifles, carefully oiled and wrapped in sacking, also an old leather bandolier half full of ammunition.

"The English never found these," Annie Krillet said, picking up a clip of soft-nosed bullets. "Simeon must have hidden them here after the war, waiting, as thousands more are waiting, for the next chance. Ah, he was a brave burgher, and, old as he was, would have been the first on commando when next the country rises to smite the Amalekites. And you have murdered him, you and your cursed Englishman!" Hatred of the English race was now the passion that swayed her soul, and, kneeling there as she was.

she raised her clasped hands above her head and cried aloud, "May the Lord bring the murderer to justice." Then the thought that she had knelt there, not to pray for vengeance, but to take a bribe to shield an enemy of her country, infuriated her, and she rose to her feet grasping the iron bar, and began to storm at Deborah, who retreated before this armed fury.

"You Jezebel!" she shrieked; "the seven devils that possess you have tempted me, but the Lord has given me strength, and I know now that the money would bring me misery, and not happiness; a curse would come to me with every coin in that box, curses which shall be your portion instead. This paper has made me the instrument of the Lord, and I will do even as He hath commanded." So she raved on, her speech degenerating into mere broken invective, for the tumult within her of religious scruples, superstitious fears, and greed for gold distracted her and made her mad. At the moment religion was uppermost in her mind—a distorted kind of Old Testament religion, that consisted chiefly of cursing one's enemies.

In an agony of suspense Deborah waited while the old woman incoherently misquoted Isaiah, till she finally sank exhausted into a chair. Then Deborah sat down on the bed and looked at Annie Krillet in silence, thinking desperately. Presently the old woman's glance turned in the direction of the hearthstone. Then Deborah rose, and taking the iron box in both hands lifted it.

"What are you doing?" asked the Boer woman, with a kind of snarl.

"I am going to put back the stone," answered the other calmly. "The box is heavy," she added, shifting its position, and then laying her hands on the stone.

"How much is there?" asked Annie Krillet, her resolution wavering as she saw the treasure about to disappear.

"I do not know, but there is a great deal of gold. I have seen it, though it has not been touched since Simeon died."

"Will you swear you have not tampered with it?"

"Tampered with it? It is my own! But I declare to you that it is just as Simeon left it."

"Leave that stone alone," said the old woman hastily; "I will count the money. Give me the key."

"It is downstairs. Help me to carry the box. You can count the gold better on the table in the parlour, for there is a great heap of it."

Annie Krillet's eyes glittered as she took one handle of the box and realised its weight. Then the two women carried it between them to the large room downstairs, where they placed it on the table. Neither spoke as Deborah unlocked a cupboard and produced a bunch of keys, selecting one which she fitted into the lock of the iron box. She felt that silence was her best weapon now. Let the gold itself do the work.

After a moment's hesitation Annie Krillet turned the key, and took out bag after bag of coins. The first one she opened contained silver, so she pushed it on one side and untied the string of the next. Here was gold, a mass of shining sovereigns, mostly old Transvaal pieces, stamped with the simple old face of Paul Kruger where one would expect to find the image of a king—but all the more precious to Boer eyes for that. As the contents of the bag were emptied out one piece rolled off the table and under a side-board, from which position the old woman rescued it after much grovelling on the floor and heavy breathing. Then she began to count the store with nervous fingers, still clutching in her right hand the scrap of paper which was to be weighed against so much gold. Once she looked up at Deborah, and read in her eyes triumph and contempt. Then she muttered something and hesitated, but soon the bony, toil-stained fingers wandered back to the heap of metal.

Deborah waited. There was a large fire in the room, for it was washing-day, and the Kaffir girl had been boiling a huge cauldron of water. Nevertheless she felt cold, and added a log and then another to the flame.

Presently the woman at the table looked up. "This money should be mine by right," she said in a querulous tone. "What claim have you to the savings of a husband whom you first deceived and then murdered? I am his own flesh and blood."

She was trying to satisfy her own conscience, and Deborah knew it. She could read the thoughts that were jumbled together in the old woman's brain, and could mark the pitiful attempt to justify avarice, hate, and all uncharitableness by Christian religion.

"My dead husband's money is mine by all the laws of the world," she said, "but it is yours if you choose to buy it. Give me that paper and take the money."

Annie Krillet was silent, her right hand clutched the letter, but her eyes rested longingly on the gold. She was sore tempted, but found it hard to renounce her vengeance.

"The good Lord has chosen me as an instrument," she muttered at last.

"The good Lord can do His will without your help," retorted the other contemptuously.

"Would that my duty might be shown to me clear!" said the woman piously.

Deborah saw that she wanted an excuse, and gave her one: "The first duty of a Christian woman is to her family," she said. "Would you rob your own children?"

The suggestion seemed to have the desired effect, for after a little further hesitation the elder woman said—

"Deborah Krillet, if I burn this letter will you give me all that money?"

"Yes."

"Will you swear it; swear it on the Book?"

"I will," said Deborah simply, taking up the great family Bible.

"Ay, but there is something more," cried the Boer, determined, now that her decision was made, to drive as hard a bargain as she could. She would have some revenge after all. Her malice should have some satisfaction. "You will swear by the God of Israel, and on His holy Book, that henceforward you will never seek to see Robert Waring again nor write to him. You will swear from this hour he shall be as a dead man to you; that his name shall pass out of your life for ever. On that condition only can you save his life."

Deborah looked at her sister-in-law, fully appreciating the cruelty that prompted this new condition. Still Waring was gone, and she could never see him again, so that such a promise, though hateful to make, would not have the effect that Annie Krillet hoped for. She insisted to herself that the promise could make no difference; but she felt as though she were signing her own death-warrant, as, laying her right hand on the Bible, she said in a clear voice—

"I swear by all that is sacred, that on the conditions that you, Annie Krillet, will destroy in my presence the letter from Robert Waring that you now hold in your hand, I will deliver to you all the money that lies on that table, and I will also undertake never to communicate with, nor willingly speak to, Robert Waring from this time forth for ever. So help me God." She

raised the Book to her lips, and then said, "Now, Annie Krillet, perform your part of the contract. Let me see the letter."

The Boer woman unfolded the paper and smoothed it out on the table so that Deborah might see the writing, and then, stretching forth her hand, let it fall into the middle of the fire, which was now blazing fiercely.

"Some day you will bitterly regret these words," she said, her cracked voice rising in triumph. "But you cannot take back your oath; let that be your punishment. Remember, you have finished for ever with Robert Waring."

"Yes, and I have finished with the Krillets," cried Deborah passionately, throwing the family Bible with a crash on the fire, where it covered up the charred remnants of Robert Waring's letter.

The old woman stood open-mouthed, aghast at what appeared in her eyes to be an appalling sacrilege, as the old dry pages curled and caught fire. The cover dropped off, and the family record of the Krillets disappeared in flame.

"Gather up your money and go," commanded Deborah; and the old Dutch woman tottered obediently across the room and began with trembling hands to rake the coins together.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"DEATH IN LIFE"

As Deborah Krillet had said, so her sister-in-law obeyed. She gathered up the blood-money and slunk out of the room. She could not leave the farm that night, for snow lay thick on the ground and still kept on falling, but she decided to make an early start on the morrow.

Meanwhile let her get away from Deborah. She must be mad, that white-faced, shaking woman; for only one who had lost her wits would have turned to vain gods, and finished her iniquities by actually burning the blessed Book itself. Ja! she was mad—mad!

Annie Krillet was long on her knees as soon as she had reached the shelter of her bedroom, trying to pacify an uneasy conscience and to atone to her brother's manes.

"You could not wish Deborah and her lover to spend your gold, Simeon," she muttered half aloud, "and if he had escaped judgment that is what would have happened. As it is, your money goes back to your own people, and the woman has vowed in the name of the Most High

never more to cast her eyes on Robert Waring. Surely, Simeon, I did well!”

So the woman argued, but she was wakeful and uneasy, nevertheless. She climbed into the great wooden bed with all her clothes on, merely kicking off her boots; and she pulled the thick coverlet well over her head. She was horribly afraid lest the dead man should suddenly come and point at her with a long, lean finger. Also she feared to hear his voice demanding sternly why she had accepted hush-money.

“Dear Lord, dear Lord,” the Boer woman muttered, tossing restlessly from side to side, “if I could only get a wink of sleep!” She asked in vain. Sleep was as far from her wakeful eyelids as from Deborah Krillet’s.

Deborah knelt in front of a fire of dead ashes, ashes that were not whiter than her face. The hours chimed out, but she neither heeded nor heard; she was utterly indifferent to the flight of time. The future faced her like a blank wall—a wall that shut in her life; and as she reviewed the position, a feeling of sick despair came over her—a dull, heavy sense of nausea.

She grew cold as she crouched by the burnt-out fire, but she lacked will or energy to move. A stiffness came over all her limbs, and her hands and feet got like ice; but she was callous to all physical sensation; she had lost touch with reality and life.

The little Kaffir maid came to seek her. She started when she caught sight of her mistress’s

face, then ran forward with a sharp cry. She caught the cold blue fingers in her own and began to rub and chafe them. Deborah let her do her will; if she had put a knife to her breast she would have been as passive.

"Vrow Deborah, what is it?" muttered the girl at last, longing for Deborah to break the terrible silence. "Has the dear Lord stricken you with sickness? Come to bed, vrow, the cocks will soon be crowing; it wants but a little to daybreak, and the sky is pale."

Deborah rose slowly to her feet. She tottered and swayed, and had to clutch at the Kaffir's warm arm; her eyes had the rigid gaze of a sleep-walker, her lips quivered pitifully.

"I am beaten," she said in low tones, as much to herself as to the Kaffir. "Never to see him again—nevermore." She paused a second, then drew herself to her full height and turned to the wondering Kaffir.

"Look at me well," she cried half fiercely, "and understand that it is possible to be alive and yet dead. Oh, nothing—nothing can touch me now," she went on quickly; "neither the frost of winter nor the heat of summer, joy or sorrow. My breast"—she smote herself fiercely—"it is barren to hope and barren to fear. My eyes, they are blind to all outside things; my lips—this is the last time they will cry out, 'Death in life.' Oh, don't you know—can you not see—that I am a dead woman? something died here to-night"—she touched her heart—

"that will never quiver or stir or start. It has often kept me awake listening to its sobbing; I shall never hear it crying again." She ceased to speak, glanced at the Kaffir girl's upturned, frightened face, then glided forward and left the room.

The Kaffir stood by the fireside, gazing down on the white ash in the grate.

"Burnt out," she muttered. "Dear Lord, a burnt-out fire."

CHAPTER XXXIX

AN EMPTY ROOM

ROBERT WARING arrived safely in England, and at once steered his course to Joan. She was staying at their flat, and his thoughts as he drove there were wild and tumultuous. He longed ardently and passionately to see his wife, but he could not wholly dismiss Deborah Krillet from his brain.

He had tried his best to forget her during the voyage home, and to banish all memory of her face and voice ; but he had failed, and utterly.

He clenched his hands tight as the cab dashed up Sloane Street. It was iniquitous, it was shameful that his thought should be with anyone but Joan now ; and yet how can a man control the vision of his brain, the song of his heart ?

He aroused himself with a start. The hansom had pulled up sharply outside the flat. In another second Joan would be in his arms. Again, as when he had first heard the news of his wife's expectations of maternity, a feeling of the glow of prospective fatherhood came over

him. A child—a son. He smiled to himself as he ran lightly up the carpeted marble stairs—he had no mind to wait for the lift—he smiled again as he opened the front-door with his latch-key. He had wired to tell Joan the hour of his arrival; she would be waiting him in the drawing-room—excited, radiant.

He halted a second with his hand on the door-knob, then flung it open and ran in. He was going to find Joan; Joan, to whom he would devote himself and his life. An immense feeling of love and tenderness came over him; a yearning to protect and cherish. The fierceness of his passion belonged to Deborah, but his affection and heart inclined to Joan, and he understood this, albeit dimly.

The room was empty.

That was the first impression he received, and he started back as though from a blow. He had never expected an empty room. Flowers bloomed in every vase, bowls full of vivid, strong-scented roses, white lilies rearing tall heads in dark corners, huge palms in copper bowls or great china pots, pots standing on pedestals. The sweet fragrance of heliotrope, the drooping splendour of purple fuchsia. Yes, the room was flower-filled, and as Joan liked to see it; but where was Joan?

Perhaps she had not received his telegram. She might be out driving or shopping with Olive. Even his masculine intelligence realised that there would be shopping to be attended

to. Dainty, pretty shopping, wistful and tender.

He walked to the mantelpiece to ring the bell and find out where Joan had gone, then drew in his breath sharply, for resting against a china ornament—a pouting Dresden shepherdess—was a bit of flimsy pink paper. Yes, she had got his wire, no doubt of that.

Suddenly down the passage came the pattering of tiny high-heeled shoes, the swish of a woman's skirt. She was coming! Robert Waring laughed at those vague fears that had begun to oppress him, and blamed himself for being so nervous and foolish. His dear, dainty girl had been in her room all the time, expecting him to seek and find her there. What a dullard he had been!

She was close to the door now; he heard her fingers pressing the knob. His heart began to beat with a trembling ecstasy, colour flushed his face, and a misty moisture clouded his eyes. After all, some things are wholly sweet and sacred to a man, notably a wife about to peril her life to give him a child.

The door opened and shut with a sharp jerk. Robert Waring sprang forward with extended arms, but they fell limply to his side when he realised Olive Denvers faced him instead of Joan.

He gazed blankly at Mrs. Denvers. She looked wretchedly ill, and as he had never seen her before. Her pretty hair, the hair she was

so proud of, was unwaved, and fastened in a loose, untidy coil, and she had not troubled to fix in her pin-curls. Her face also was innocent of powder, her nose and eyes reddened with weeping. She wore a soft silk tea-gown, and was as unlike her trim, dainty self as it seemed possible to be.

"Olive, what has happened? What is the matter?" exclaimed Waring. "For God's sake don't cry, woman," he added sharply, as she commenced to dab her face with a moist pocket-handkerchief; "but tell me where Joan is?"

Olive Denvers made no immediate answer, but crossed over and sank down on the sofa, then began to sob with all the hopeless unrestraint of a child. All her little affectations and mannerisms had deserted her, her abandonment to despair was pathetic.

Waring strode up and down the room. At last he could bear the suspense and agitation no longer; he walked up to Olive and shook her shoulders. "Can you not speak?" he asked hoarsely; "or must I ask you again where Joan is—Joan, my wife."

Olive Denvers looked up; all her small prettiness had deserted her, and Waring shrank back from the expression in her eyes. He could never have imagined Olive so moved out of herself; the look she flashed was one of positive hate.

"Joan is ill, very ill," she said in a choked, tear-laden voice; "I doubt if she will pull through."

It's a pity you couldn't have troubled yourself to come home a little earlier." The woman spoke bitterly. "Joan never shed tears before she married you, or wanted anything she didn't get." The outburst ended in tears.

"What is the matter with her? Tell me at once." There was an iron ring of command in Robert Waring's voice, and it impressed Mrs. Denvers. She could not help noticing also how deathly pale his face had got. Even the lips had turned white, and he staggered like a drunken man.

"She is fearfully ill with pneumonia; she caught a bad chill three weeks ago, and now the doctors say anything may happen. Of course, the child won't live." She spoke almost brutally; but what were all the children on earth to her compared to Joan? Besides which, she wanted to hurt Waring badly. Had not his absence preyed on Joan's mind? And had she not wept over his delayed return?

"I want to see her," the man spoke in a low, suppressed voice; he felt stunned, and hardly realised things as they were.

"You can't," Mrs. Denvers answered with a sharp snap; "any agitation or excitement would be fatal to Joan in her present weak state. I haven't even dared to tell her you were coming home to-day. Not that I think she would have taken much notice, poor darling. She hasn't spoken a word to me to-day, or hardly opened her eyes; the weakness is pitiful. She's got two

nurses, and the best doctors in London are attending her. Cecil and I saw to that. Oh no, darling Joan hasn't been neglected—except by her husband." Olive Denvers spoke quickly; then, after her last shot, she rose to her feet and left the room, casting a sharp glance at Waring as she passed him. He forgave the cruelty for the sake of her reddened eyelids.

Left alone, he flung himself down on the couch and buried his face in his hands. He still felt dazed, and hardly able to accept the position. Joan ill. Joan fighting for life, and the child's doom certain. Like Job of old, he had suddenly felt God's hand, and that hand was pressing him to the very dust.

Joan ill. He gazed round the pretty drawing-room, that delicate nest of silk. Everything about it spoke of comfort and luxury—of mere dainty charm. It was a doll's-house room, but its owner, the doll, was ill.

"The whole creation groaneth and travaileth together in pain." He quoted the words half aloud. He had often heard them before, but their sense had never come home so. Joan ill. It seemed absurd, almost ridiculous—he didn't believe it. Olive had only been trying to frighten him. Ill and like to die! He clenched his hands tightly together, and sweat broke cold and damp on his forehead. A dull pain seemed to gather round his heart.

He walked over to the piano; a large panel photograph of his wife stood on it. Joan held a

sheaf of lilies in her hand and smiled saucily at a conquered world ; and now she was a crushed and broken lily herself, stretched wearily upon a bed of pain.

He caught the photograph up and pressed his lips to it hungrily, then put it down suddenly—the glass had struck chill to his mouth, it was like kissing something dead.

Joan's workbox caught his eye. She was fond of fancy-work and clever with her silks. He opened it just for the mere pleasure of touching something that her warm, tiny fingers had played with. All at once he uttered a short, broken cry ; his hand had caught itself in the folds of some soft fabric—something wonderfully fine, white, and delicate. He drew out the scrap of cambric and looked at it almost reverently. Tuck upon tuck, tuck upon tuck, such wonderful stitching, and then the edging of lace. He didn't understand the shape or what the little garment called itself, but he knew it was something she had been making for someone.

The pity of it, the drear, awful pity. And the child would never be born alive ! How sweet she must have looked stitching away at her dainty work ! Oh, if he had only been at her side to watch her at her task ! Tears filled his eyes and a lump in his throat threatened to choke him. All at once his composure broke down, and bursting sobs somewhat relieved his pain. He had not shed a tear since the far-away days of his childhood. He had imagined himself far

above such a display of emotion ; but now he sobbed humbly, and even ventured to whisper a prayer to the God he had been pleased to ignore ; for it had come upon him that this unknown Deity was the Lord of Life and Death.

CHAPTER XL

THE PASSING OF JOAN

THE atmosphere of pain pervaded the flat. Joan had passed from one danger to another. Nurses and doctors still denied her husband the right of entrance to her room. He had to be content with brief and seemingly meaningless reports, and the oft-repeated iteration that whilst there is life there is hope.

And he was powerless to help the fragile, suffering thing. That was the cruelty and the irony of it, for all his strength of limb and sinew, and desire to die for her if need be, he could do nothing to help. He was not even of such service as that poor, tear-dashed butterfly, Olive Denvers. She, at least, was allowed in the sick-room, privileged to fan the half-fainting sufferer, to raise or depress a pillow, to sit by the bedside and gaze at her.

Olive had grown more gentle with Robert Waring, his dumb misery had touched her heart. It was impossible to see him and not realise that he cared for Joan, and that he was literally consumed with anxiety for her well-being. Olive

grew more haggard herself every day. It was the first time that anxiety or sorrow had ever touched her life, and she was breaking down badly under the strain.

Then came an afternoon of heavy, dull anxiety. Olive Denvers wandered restlessly backwards and forwards between Joan's bedroom and the smoking-room, where Robert Waring sat, trying to smoke. He never questioned Olive as she came in and out of the room; he feared too much what her answer might be; but he used to glance at her with strained eyes, trying as best he could to read her face.

She was painfully restless and agitated, poor little woman; her nerves raw and on edge.

"What a perfectly hideous room this is," she remarked, after one of her sudden entries, crossing over to the window and pulling the blind up and down with jerks. "I cannot imagine how you ever came to choose such hideous hangings. The whole den is like a bad imitation of an Oriental stall at a bazaar;" and she laughed irritably, her eyes filling with big tears.

Waring glanced round the room and agreed with her. The brilliant reds and yellows jarred on him. He had no mind to contemplate grinning Buddhas and hideous Chinese gods. He was crying in his heart to the Galilean, He to whom all men came in the end.

Suddenly Olive ceased to jerk the blind-string, and stood motionless—listening. Waring listened too. A sharp cry rang through the flat, the

cry of one torn by pain. Olive darted from the room. She did not return. The cries continued, and after a time they grew more shrill and poignant. Waring felt sick. He poured himself out a wineglassful of brandy and drained it to the last drop. All at once the shrieks ceased. The man mopped his brow with a feeling of intense relief and thankfulness. Even if death had stilled that piteous voice it were well, for death is admittedly the conqueror of pain, and Joan, who feared a pin-scratch, how could she endure agony?

He sat down on the lounge to wait. Someone would surely come to him soon—the world owed him so much charity. He began to pick nervously at a bit of fringe that edged one of the Delhi cushions, he twirled the red and yellow strands tightly round and round the little finger of his left hand, stopping the circulation and making it appear blue and swollen. All at once he sprang up erect, intent. Someone had entered the room—a tall, thin man, carrying a shiny black bag. Waring noticed what a fine black pearl he wore as a scarf-pin, and the wisp of grey hair over the high forehead. He was able to notice everything. A strange physical condition seemed to have come over him. He was unnaturally observant, but he shrank from asking after Joan, and muttered some foolish question about the weather, shifting backwards and forwards on his feet.

The big doctor had met such men before. He

noticed how Waring's mouth and eyes twitched, and he felt sorry for him. Yet he must speak the truth; it would be the best kindness in the end.

He forebore to glance at Waring whilst he said what he had to say; he felt it would be hardly decent. The first wild moments of a man's agony should be respected. He walked over to the window and pulled up the blind Olive had pulled down. It would be time enough for drawn blinds later on.

The street he gazed into was pulsing and throbbing with life. Cabs, carts, carriages, omnibuses, foot-passengers—they all swept on like a great human wave. The man looked at them testily. There was a certain little lady whose feet would cease to dance, and for her sake he was annoyed with all these others.

"It's all damned rot." Waring spoke huskily, and through his assertion could be traced a note of fear. "I don't believe it; damn you. I can't believe it. Other women get through this sort of thing; why shouldn't my Joan?" He nearly choked as he pronounced her name, and he gripped the mantelpiece convulsively.

"I have told you the truth," replied the other man in a low voice. He had just recognised a pretty woman who had driven by in her victoria; he had got her through a severe illness only a month ago. Why had he been so powerless to save the poor little doll in the other room? He wondered, after all, if science had as much to do with the hour of death as he had imagined.

Possibly there was a stronger power, one he had failed to take into consideration.

"But you mustn't let her die; I tell you, you mustn't." Waring came forward and clutched the doctor by his shoulder. "Call in another doctor—twenty if you like—the best men in London, and pull her through between you all. Don't you realise how young she is—only a mere child. You won't let her die?" He was appallingly pathetic as he poured out his wild appeal; there was something tragic in his loss of self-restraint and his inability to accept the blow which had fallen.

"No man on this earth could do more for Mrs. Waring than has been done," answered the doctor slowly, "and Dr. Travers, who is with her now, will tell you the same. But we're beaten. Don't think I do not realise what this means to you—I dare not insult you with sympathy—it's an hour you must face alone."

"I want to go to her." Robert Waring hardly recognised his own voice, and the room and everything in it seemed dancing wildly round. He put his hand out and clutched at the back of a chair to steady himself.

"So you shall. They will come for you in a little while," the other replied in low tones. "You will show self-control? She doesn't know or guess, poor child. And why tell her?"

"You may trust me;" Waring cleared his throat; "she shall not be troubled." His

voice broke; he pointed to the door. "Go," he muttered "For God's sake, leave me alone!"

The other obeyed in silence.

Waring walked to a small side-table and opened the tantalus that stood on it, and poured himself out some brandy, and drank it down neat. The burning fluid seemed to warm some life back to him; he ceased to shiver, and the sensation of nausea vanished. His hands and feet began to shoot, and he felt less a statue of stone.

"God," he muttered, as he put down the glass, and yet again "God!" Suddenly he craned his neck forward, listening. Of all impossible things, Joan was singing. He could hear her distinctly. Her voice rose clear and sweet, piercing through the flat. The notes a little high, perhaps. But what of that?—Joan was singing.

The doctor, who said she was dying, must have lied to him, for dying women don't sing. Yet in his wild relief Waring felt he could forgive the man—yes, even his worst enemy—for how could he harbour resentment against anyone in the world now Joan came tripping back from the gates of death?

"The world was full of sweet content
When Phillida was young,
Hey nonny-nonny-oh."

How charmingly she lilted the quaint old song. It was an Elizabethan trifle he was particularly fond of, but how suddenly the voice

ceased to sing, and then what wild confusion of words. Hark! She began to sing again—

“Sing-song in the green garden closes,
I am weary of your kisses, said the girl to the boy;
With my doll went all my blisses,
I am weary of your kisses,
And this thing is only sorrow that you told me was a joy.
Sing-song in the green garden closes,
But what's the good of crying for a broken—broken toy.”

Waring remembered the last time Joan had sung that song to him, and he started to his feet, unable to remain away from her any longer. The women should not keep him from her, let them say what they would; she wanted him as he wanted her.

He hurried through the swinging door at the end of the passage, and made his way to Joan's room. She was still singing fitful, broken scraps of songs, and her voice seemed to be getting very shrill. He knocked at the door, and Olive Denvers came out to speak to him.

“She's better; let me in,” he cried, trying to push past her.

“She's dying!” came the fierce answer. “You shall see her presently. She wouldn't know you now; but they say before the end comes——” Tears choked Mrs. Denvers' voice, and she hurried back into the room.

It was quite late, close on midnight before they summoned Robert Waring. He was never quite able to remember how he had got through the preceding hours. He had a hazy impression

that the butler brought him a tray of food and implored him at least to swallow some hot soup; also, that he cursed the man to his face and sent him away. Then he remembered tramping up and down the room, also the hateful ticking of the clock.

Olive herself came to fetch him. She looked very white, but her face had gained a strange softness. She kissed Waring lightly on his forehead. "She doesn't suffer, Robert," she whispered; "she has done with pain for ever."

He made no answer, only caught his breath a little; then followed Olive down the passage. There was only a dim light burning in the room, but he made out the presence of a grey-robed nurse, and the doctor who usually attended Joan was standing by the large dressing-table. A screen pulled round the bed concealed Joan from his sight.

"Tell her," he muttered, plucking at Olive's sleeve. His heart was beginning to thump furiously, and his nostrils resented the close, sickly odour of some anæsthetic that seemed to fill the room.

Olive Denvers moved softly forward and went behind the screen. She was a brave little woman at this supreme moment.

"Joan, pet," she said clearly, "Robert is here; he just wants to kiss you good-night, darling. He won't disturb you, my sweet."

There came the faintest stir in the big bed, the least rustle, then a girlish, protesting voice.

“Robert—here. Oh, tell him he mustn’t see me till Mason has put my tea-jacket on and brushed my hair. I look horrid now. I’ll see him later, Olive—after I’ve rested.”

The sound of a man’s low sob broke the tragic silence that followed. Joan on her deathbed was true to her principles and her powder-puff.

A few hours later there was no need for the screen, so they drew it away. Joan lay resting—a child clasping a doll—and both of them fast asleep.

CHAPTER XLI

"I HAVE SWORN A VOW"

THREE years had passed since Deborah Krillet had urged Waring on his road to England, three barren, profitless years.

The Kaffir girl had married, and a plump black baby now rolled about on the stoep, and made chuckling, gurgling baby noises. Deborah took no notice of the child; if it lay in her path, she stepped out of the way—that was all.

She ruled her Kaffirs firmly; the boys had to be honest, and the work to be done, otherwise her voice rang out clear and crisp, and she had learnt to use the whip. She saw to it that she was neither robbed nor cheated, and she kept up some sort of intercourse with her Boer kinsfolk, driving into the town on Sacrament Sundays, and attending local weddings and dances. She did this for her pride's sake.

"Dear Lord, but she makes me shiver, with her cold white face and those terribly sad eyes," the Boer women used to whisper to each other, looking furtively at Deborah, and wondering at her plain attire and the severe simplicity of her

hair. This was a changed Deborah from the girl they had known, so changed that she might have been her own ghost.

The men used to crowd round the pale woman, and she might have had her choice of them. Had she not a good farm and hundreds of sheep, handsome Angora rams and fine fat ewes? It was a sin and a folly that she remained unmarried.

Yet to all offers of "up-sitting" Deborah shook her head, and a curious smile used to cross her face. After having loved Robert Waring was it likely that she should descend to a Boer farmer? The mere idea caused her to laugh mirthlessly.

It happened one evening that she attended a wedding. Jan van Kerrel had elected to marry a short, squat, little Dutch girl, with a round, fat face and two sharp, merry eyes. She was a dull, good-natured little person, and would make him an excellent wife; she certainly abased herself in spirit and gazed at her bridegroom with eyes of worship, but Jan contrasted her with Deborah and bit his lips.

Deborah felt as much pleasure in this marriage as she could feel over anything. She was honestly fond of Jan van Kerrel, and she liked the look of his little bride. The girl was dressed in a stiffly starched white muslin frock, and wore a great deal of brass jewellery; her face shone with happiness and soap, and she had some sprays of orange blossom in her hair.

Deborah had sighed a little as she watched her dancing to the music of "Blue Waters," it seemed so easy to be happy, and yet she herself had missed happiness for ever.

The floor was covered with whirling couples, and the notes of the fiddles and heavy stamping of feet began to make Deborah's head ache, and the dust beaten up by the dancers got in her eyes and choked her throat. She began to think gratefully of the long, cool drive home; then started, for the bridegroom was addressing her; he had deserted his bride for the moment.

"Are you tired, Deborah?" There was a note of emotion in his voice, an eager look in his eyes. He knew well that the bride in her muslin frock was as nothing to him compared to the grave, sad woman in the black cotton dress, unrelieved by trinket or ribbon. What if Deborah had lost her wild, wonderful beauty? She would always be fair in his eyes, and perhaps he loved her best silent, subdued, sorrowful. It hurt him to think she would drive home alone. He thought of his 'bridal chamber, hung about as it was with rosettes of white ribbon and artificial flowers. All at once a drive under the stars with Deborah seemed more attractive.

"I'm not tired," replied Deborah slowly, "but I want to go. Jan, could you slip out and order the boy to bring round the buggy? I will come out when you tell me it's there."

"Why do you want to go?" he asked. "It's not eleven yet."

She sighed wearily and fixed her dark eyes on him. "I'm bored," she answered in a low voice; "out of touch with it all. I don't want to dance, and sitting up against a wall becomes wearisome. Do what I ask, Jan."

He obeyed her, turning away without a word. A quarter of an hour later the buggy had come round, and he helped her into it, wrapping the rugs tightly round her slim form.

She thanked him with a fleeting smile, then took the reins; her face seen in the moonlight looked thin and worn.

"Deborah," the man muttered, "I want to tell you something—she's not to me what you were, and never will be. Only I was lonely, and the Kaffir girls wanted a mistress, and I couldn't manage them." He spoke with obvious sincerity, adding with a smile, "She worships the ground I tread on. You can see that for yourself."

Deborah's eyes flashed with sudden fire, and she felt she hated the whole world of men—men who prey on women's hearts.

"Be good to her," she cried half fiercely, "she's flesh and blood. As to myself I should never have worshipped you, Jan, so things are better as they are."

She touched the horse slightly with her whip, and set out to cross the plain, driving towards solitude and darkness. Jan van Kerrel re-

entered the warm, lit-up farm. He was hailed with shouts of welcome, the dancing was getting wilder, the music louder. He cast care from his shoulders, caught his little wife by her waist, and whirled her into the centre of the room.

It was very late before Deborah reached the lonely farm. The dogs began to bark at the first sound of her wheels, and she fancied she heard someone telling them to lie down. She smiled bitterly at her own wild fancy. What should Robert Waring be doing at the lonely farm — Robert, who had a wife and child in England?

"God in heaven," she muttered passionately, "am I never to be suffered to forget? Must I hear his voice in waking hours as well as in my dreams?" She drove up sharply, then let the reins fall from her hands with a low, broken cry. The moonlight revealed the figure of a man standing on the stoep and bending over the rail. He looked up, and Deborah Krillet recognised Robert Waring.

"He has come back," she whispered under her breath, "he has come back." Then she set her mouth firm and sprang out of the buggy.

Waring advanced to meet her. He took no notice of the open-mouthed Kaffir boys; his eyes were fixed on the woman he had crossed the seas to find. The night was nearly over, the dawn at hand, and the Shulamite would be glad of his coming.

Was she glad? She was strangely cold as she put by his proffered embrace, and led the way into the farm, and her face turned an ashen grey. He blamed himself for returning in so dramatic and unexpected a fashion; naturally it would be a shock to her, he was always careless and inconsiderate.

"Why have you come back?" She faced him fiercely with the words. She had turned up the lamp in the parlour, and he saw plainly how thin and ill she looked. Yet she was curiously attractive so. He liked her wan pallor, her reed-like grace. She had been refined by flame, and all that was carnal destroyed.

"I came because I had to," he replied slowly. "Joan has been dead nearly three years, and I cannot forget her, Deborah! But if you choose you can make me forget. Dear, I loved you both." He paused and hesitated, then went on firmly, "Let the dead bury the dead. You and I are alive, Deborah, and we love each other. Let me forget the past."

"So you come to me now—" her voice was hysterical and scornful, "now that my beauty has worn away and my heart has grown hard, and tears have fretted my cheeks, and despair has sharpened my voice. There is nothing to desire in me now—nothing, nothing!" She flung her arms wildly over her head. "I am no longer the Shulamite; I have become as a dead woman, a withered leaf. Have I a single grace left that I had?"

" 'Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet ;' " he quoted the words softly. " You will always be fair in my eyes, Deborah ; don't you know that ? Speak to me, kiss me ! The last three years have been hard, lonely years, and I want you, Deborah, to banish them from my mind ; I shall forget them in your arms." He opened his own arms as he spoke, and came close to her, his breath coming in short gasps, his eyes fixed on her troubled face.

Deborah shrank back against the wall.

" Don't touch me," she muttered ; " you are as one dead to me. I swore in God's holy name to put you utterly from my life if Annie Krillet could be moved thereby to destroy that confession of yours, which she stole. She asked a heavy price, Robert, but I paid it even to the utmost farthing. I am bankrupt now, bankrupt of hope and love." She crossed her arms and looked at him steadily.

Robert Waring essayed an uneasy laugh.

" A promise extorted out of you by a wicked old woman, and under compulsion ! You are not bound to keep it. Don't you know that, Deborah ? Now, tell me all that happened, dear—the whole story." He sat down on the round wooden table as he spoke, and tried by look and gesture to influence her to sit by his side, encircled by his arm ; but she made no movement towards him, she stood in front, white and rigid, telling him the whole story in a few simple words.

At the close of her narrative there came a long pause; then the man swore softly under his breath, his eyes moist and glistening, as he moved off the table and came close to Deborah.

"You did all that for me," he said softly. "My precious girl; but the years to come shall repay you."

"The years to come," she replied. "Why speak of them? They will be as dead years to me. Now leave me, please. I will be up early to-morrow to give you some coffee before you start. You will depart soon after daybreak."

"Nothing of the kind," he replied shortly. "Shall a promise made to a foolish old woman part a man and woman who love each other? Why, the idea's absurd. No, Deborah, when I go you go with me. Start to-morrow if you like, and we'll get married at the first town we come to. Don't you understand what you are to me? I've come to you; I want you." He lost his glib oratory, his clever turn of phrase, and could only express himself in the most primitive fashion.

Deborah gazed at him steadily.

"You cannot kindle flame out of burnt ashes," she said slowly. "I have been brought very low, even to the dust, and my heart and spirit have been broken within me. My passion has been drowned in tears, and even if it were not so"—she reared her head proudly—"I should still send you away, for I made my vow to God,

and not to Annie Krillet. And who am I to break a vow made unto the Lord?"

"Do you think God would care?" the man cried passionately.

"I do," came her quick answer; "for He is a jealous God; His vengeance would be swift and terrible. Not that I fear for myself, but for you, for you. Do you think I would be the means of sending you to the pit?" She spoke with iron bigotry, believing all she said.

"I'll risk hell——" began Waring huskily.

"I will not let you." She moved to the door as she spoke. Great scalding tears were falling down her thin cheeks, but her will was obdurate; at all costs she would save Waring's soul from destruction, so she went out to sacrifice herself on the altar of superstition.

Robert Waring, left alone, sighed heavily. He was powerless to fight against the Lord Jehovah. No modern creed is strong enough, no modern man! Jehovah had claimed Deborah. How was a mere man to snatch her from the horns of the altar?

He glanced wearily into the days ahead. He had the wide world for his treading—position, ambition, wealth, love of women, praise of men; yet he wanted something more. He wanted a pale woman, a woman whose beauty had deserted her to be replaced by something finer—and she had barred her door. For ever and for ever the salt had lost its flavour, and Waring the epicurean would become Waring

the stoic, or else drift rudderless on the restless wave, sated and tired.

Deborah Krillet stood on the stoep of the lonely farm, shading her eyes from the sun-glow, watching a speck on the plain, a moving speck.

Soon it would pass out of sight and become lost in the unknown.



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